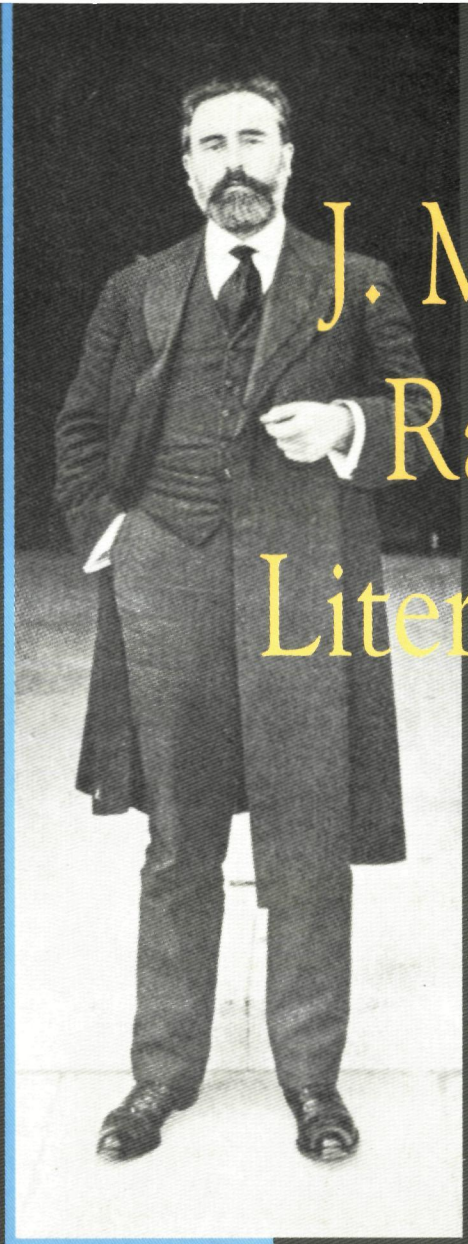

J. M. Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic

Odin Dekkers

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een wetenschappelijke proeve op het gebied van de Letteren

PROEFSCHRIFT

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Contents

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Preface

Of the very few studies devoted to the life and work of John Mackinnon Robertson (1856–1933), the most thorough is undoubtedly Conrad J. Kaczkowski's unpublished Ph.D. thesis *John Mackinnon Robertson: Freethinker and Radical* (St. Louis University, 1964).[1] In over 600 pages, it attempts to discuss nearly every aspect of Robertson's dauntingly copious *oeuvre*, which embraces, with a comprehensiveness no longer a feature of our own highly specialised age, philosophy, economics, sociology, religion, and politics alike. However, what the thesis conspicuously does not do is pay any attention to Robertson's work on the topic that was in the end perhaps closest to his heart: literature. Kaczkowski's thesis even ends on the ominous note that 'it may be observed that if Robertson followed the same "critical" norms in his literary efforts as he did in his Biblical criticism, there would be little value in attempting an investigation of this area.'

Leaving aside for the moment the question of the validity of Robertson's biblical criticism, I had better not hesitate to state outright that the present study represents precisely that which Kaczkowski advises against: an investigation into Robertson's work as a literary critic. It is, in fact, my conviction that of all of Robertson's writings, those on literature and literary criticism are by far the most interesting. What I will attempt to demonstrate in the course of the following pages is that within the context of his time, Robertson was a noteworthy literary critic and theoretician of literary criticism, whose writings do not deserve the general neglect into which they have very clearly fallen. In his own spirit, the investigation will be a critical one, and one conclusion may well be that Robertson does not always attain the ambitious goals he sets himself. However, this does not mean that the goals themselves and the attempts to reach them should be any less interesting from a literary–historical point of view. The claim for Robertson is not that he succeeds in solving the problems literary critics and theoreticians before and after him have struggled with, but rather that his own struggle shows him to possess a powerful and independent mind, contact with which may significantly increase our

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[1] The other two are Martin Page, *Britain's Unknown Genius. The Life–Work of J.M. Robertson* (London, 1984), and *J.M. Robertson (1856–1933): Liberal, Rationalist, & Scholar*, ed. G.A. Wells (London, 1987).

understanding of the late–nineteenth, early–twentieth century literary landscape.

From the very start of my research I have been aware of the problem that I would be discussing the work of an author with whose life and writings hardly anyone is familiar nowadays. Chapter 1 represents a first step towards remedying this situation by providing an outline of Robertson's life, paying due attention to the historical context in which Robertson rose to relative fame and notoriety as one of the most combative rationalists of the age. Whether he was discussing free trade or Tennyson's *Maud*, pagan mythology or the rhythms of Shakespeare's verse, Robertson would never let his readers forget that he was a rationalist first and foremost (which is not to say that he was always rational!). Chapter 2 takes up the theme of Robertson's rationalism, and is divided into two parts. Part 1 aims to establish the appropriate historical backgrounding for Part 2 with a general discussion of the rise of rationalism in Britain in the nineteenth century; Part 2 then takes a more detailed look at the philosophical foundations of Robertson's particular brand of rationalism.

In Chapter 3, which is again divided into two sections, we will see how Robertson's faith in reason led him to the conviction that literary criticism could and should be based on a scientific footing. Part 1 will show that Robertson was by no means alone in this conviction by representing the ideas of a number of Victorian critics who all believed (though in different ways) that science could raise criticism to a higher plane; in Part 2 I will investigate Robertson's own thoughts and theories on the subject. Moving from theory to practice, Chapter 4 finally focuses on Robertson's concrete approaches to a number of literary figures and their work, in drama (Part 1), fiction (Part 2), and poetry (Part 3) respectively. As in the two previous chapters, I will attempt to place Robertson's writings in the contextual framework of the contemporary literary scene, not with a view to breaking new ground in topics like the rise of the novel or the aesthetic movement, but primarily in order to promote a better understanding of Robertson's viewpoints. Throughout all four chapters I will make frequent use of quotations from his work, which should at least give readers a 'taste' of Robertson's vigorous and always somewhat eccentric style of writing and may perhaps inspire them to look up the original book or article.[2]

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[2] Although generally the titles of Robertson's books and articles are given in full, for convenience's sake I have consistently abbreviated *Essays towards a Critical Method* and *New Essays towards a Critical Method* as *ETCM* and *NETCM* respectively, both in the main text and in the footnotes.

Chapter 1

The life of J.M. Robertson

Introduction

J.M. Robertson has not made life easy for anyone who chooses to write his biography. In fact, the scarcity of available biographical material is remarkable for a man who led so public a life. No full–length biography was ever written, nor did Robertson himself, unlike many of his friends and acquaintances, put his reminiscences to paper. Although he was as prolific in his correspondence as he was elsewhere in his writing, and we are indeed fortunate that several hundreds of his letters have survived (still a relatively small percentage of his overall output), he reveals very little of the actual circumstances of his personal life, let alone of his emotions. As a result, the biography of this man who combined extreme outspokenness in public affairs with careful reticence about his private life will largely have to be pieced together on the basis of secondary sources: a number of appreciations by friends, passing references in the works of friends or other contemporaries, and accounts of his activities in various freethought periodicals. In spite of the difficulties Robertson himself may have put in its way, the following chapter is an attempt to do just that, the ulterior motive being to provide a stepping–stone to the discussions of his various writings (notably his literary criticism) which are to follow.

The Scottish Years: 1856–1884[1]

John Mackinnon Robertson, 'that most erudite of late Victorians',[2] was born at Brodick in the Isle of Arran on 14 November 1856. He was the second son of John Robertson of Pertshire, and Susan, daughter of John Mackinnon, of

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[1] The main source for this section of Robertson's biography is the short account of Robertson's life by J.P. Gilmour which is prefixed, together with appreciations by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Ernest Newman, and John A. Hobson, to the 1936 edition of Robertson's *History of Freethought . . . to the Period of the French Revolution*. Notes are only given here when information from other sources than Gilmour is used.

[2] *Minutes of the Rainbow Circle 1894–1924*, ed. Michael Freeden (London, 1989), p. 13.

Brodick.[3] At an early age he moved with his parents to Stirling, where he went to school until he was thirteen years old. At school, where he managed to learn the rudiments of Latin, he acquired the habit of omnivorous reading that was to become such an essential part of his being. After Robertson's death, his school fellow and lifelong friend William Jenkins recalled how the two of them devoured all the books they could lay their hands on, with a marked preference for 'the thriller type'.[4] In spite of his many explorations into more complex territory (or perhaps rather because of these), Robertson never lost his taste for this genre, and in later life developed 'a hygienic habit of reading thrillers after meals' in order, as he said with typical irony, 'to prevent my brains from working at those times.' It seems unlikely that he ever managed to accomplish this, however. To a polymath like Robertson, mental exercise was not only pleasurable, but, in fact, as natural and necessary as breathing.

Since his parents were poor (his father was a crofter)[5] and could not afford to continue his education after his thirteenth year, he went to work as a telegraph clerk on the railways in Stirling. He held this job for a year or so, and then moved to Edinburgh, where he worked in a law office for four years. This was followed by two years of clerking with an insurance company. This kind of job cannot have provided him with much of an intellectual challenge, although he must have been exaggerating when he commented several decades later: 'I claim to have learned as little law in four years as anyone ever did.'[6] But there were plenty of intellectual challenges in his spare time. In the evenings he rubbed up his Latin, so that he could read Livy with little difficulty. To Robertson, the learning of languages was the key to the acquisition of the

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[3] *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament. Vol. II: 1886–1918*, eds Michael Stenton and Stephen Lees (Sussex, 1978), p. 306.

[4] William Jenkins, 'Further Tributes to J.M. Robertson', *Literary Guide* (March 1933), p. 53. Following Robertson's death on 5 January 1933, in February and March the *Literary Guide* published a number of tributes by friends. For over thirty years, Robertson had been closely associated with this rationalist monthly, to which he made countless contributions. Originally published by the rationalist publisher C.A. Watts under the title *Watts's Literary Guide, being a record of liberal and advanced publications* from November 1885 to September 1894, it was continued as *The Literary Guide, a monthly record and review of liberal and advanced publications* from October 1894 to June 1896, and then with the sub–title *A Rationalist Review* from July 1896 to March 1954. The sub–title was absent from April 1954 to September 1956, and in October 1956 *The Literary Guide* became *The Humanist*. Its main interest was with rationalist issues in a very broad sense, not, as the title might seem to imply, with 'belles lettres' as such.

[5] This is confirmed by several sources. Only one source states that Robertson's father was 'a fisherman at Lamlash': Robert Gunn Davis, 'A Journalist of Fame', *Edinburgh Evening News* (13 November 1943), p. 5.

[6] J.M. Robertson, 'Speech on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday', *Literary Guide* (January 1927), p. 22.

widest possible range of knowledge. He studied German and French, and finally mastered six or seven languages, including – an unusual feat – Dutch.[7] A great deal of his time was also devoted to the ardent perusal of the works of Thomas Carlyle, much to his later embarrassment.[8] Although Robertson's father, for one, was far from illiterate and even reproached him when he was about twelve for not reading Hugh Miller's *Old Red Sandstone* in the time he was spending on *Robinson Crusoe,*[9] his perpetual reading filled his parents with worry: what was all this bookishness going to lead to?[10] The boy himself had his eyes firmly fixed on a literary future of some sort, although he was willing to take a somewhat cumbersome detour. When he was sixteen years old he told himself: 'The thing for me to do is to master Spanish, get into the copper trade, make a reasonable fortune in twenty years or so, and then withdraw and devote myself to my books.'[11] This reckless plan was never executed, nor did Robertson ever succeed in making a fortune. The closest he ever came to fulfilling his ideal was in the last fifteen years of his life, when he did manage to dedicate the best part of his time to his studies, although his financial affairs always remained a source of worry.

Looking back as an older man on his adolescence, Robertson observed that 'his active instincts' had been 'mainly aesthetic', adding that if he had had a rich father, he would have become an artist, 'a fourth–rater at that'.[12] However, Robertson's first priority in life was simply to earn his living, and this led him to the career that most effectively satisfied both his pecuniary and literary interests: journalism. Around the period of his clerking job at the insurance company, he started to contribute to local journals. He even wrote a novel, which was serialized in a provincial newspaper, and to which he would later refer apologetically as a 'pot–boiler'.[13] He was now just over twenty, and clearly unusually well–equipped for the job he was drifting into. There was still a lingering hope that he could make money by writing plays and novels, of which he was always a ceaseless reader. He also developed a special interest in the history of the drama, which, as we shall see, he was never to lose. However,

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[7] F.J. Gould, *Chats with Pioneers of Modern Thought* (London, 1898), p. 127. In the interview Gould had with him, Robertson testified to his esteem for the *Geschiedenis van den Godsdienst tot aan de Heerschappij der Wereldgodsdiensten* (History of Religion, 1876) by the Dutch professor of theology C.P. Tiele (1830–1902), 'so much so that, in order to study his essay on Christ and Krishna, I took the trouble to learn Dutch.'

[8] *Modern Humanists* (London, 1891), p. 42.

[9] *What to Read* (London, 1904), p. 10.

[10] Robertson, 'Speech on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday', p. 22.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[13] Unfortunately, Gilmour, who provides this information, specifies neither the 'local journals' nor the 'provincial newspaper'.

'always the lure of truth–seeking seemed to overpower all the other lures',[14] and since to Robertson the path of truth–seeking ran through journalism, it was there that his immediate future lay.

In 1877 he met William Archer, who was the same age as Robertson, and who was already pursuing a career as a dramatic critic. Since 1875, he had been a leader writer for the *Edinburgh Evening News*. The two young men struck up a lifelong friendship, and when Archer decided to move to London in 1878, he recommended Robertson as his successor.[15] Archer had been greatly impressed by his new friend's power of mind, with which he had become well–acquainted in the course of many country walks and evening talks in Archer's Hanover Street 'eyrie'. Robertson was introduced to 'Mr John', the editor, and, as Archer wrote, matters were arranged without the least difficulty.[16] So there he was: twenty–one years old, and ready to instruct his fellow citizens on things in general.[17] The *Edinburgh Evening News* was an organ of advanced Radicalism, the editor of which, John Wilson, was a disciple of Herbert Spencer. Once, when asked by a concerned northern clergyman to which denomination his young men in general belonged, he had answered in an off–hand tone: 'Ou, maistly Atheists.'[18]

There is little doubt that Robertson, as one of these young men, had indeed become an atheist. He wrote to his friend Dobell: 'I gave up the "divine" notion in my teens: when I came to probe thoroughly the "human" problem I was long past attaching any meaning whatever to the "divine" conception.'[19] He was gradually becoming more and more involved in the secularist movement, which was gaining popularity as well as notoriety in the years between 1874 and 1880.[20] In September 1878 Robertson attended a lecture by the redoubtable figurehead of the secularist movement, Charles Bradlaugh:

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[14] Robertson, 'Speech on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday', p. 23.

[15] *William Archer as Rationalist. With a biographical sketch by The Rt. Hon. J.M. Robertson*, ed. J.M. Robertson (London, 1925), p. viii. The DNB–entry on Robertson by Harold Laski states erroneously that Archer was Robertson's colleague at the *Edinburgh Evening News*.

[16] C. Archer, *William Archer. Life, Work, Friendships*, (London, 1931), p. 74. In this biography, Charles Archer also provides transcripts of the following letters between the two friends: WA to JMR, 21 October 1881; JMR to WA, 23 October 1881; WA to JMR, 26 October 1881; WA to JMR, 8 January 1882; WA to JMR, 12 February 1882; WA to JMR, 6 July 1923. These transcripts are the only surviving records of the correspondence.

[17] Robertson, 'Speech on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday', p. 23.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Robertson to Dobell, 3 February 1906; Robertson's correspondence with his friend and bookseller Bertram Dobell is in the Bodleian Library, MS Dobell C 43, ff. 12–83.

[20] Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans. Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester, 1980), pp. 11–22.

> I was told he was to lecture on Giordano Bruno in a hall in Edinburgh, and went to hear him. With that lecture, which first brought me in contact with the Freethought movement, I associate the only sensation of pain, and that not a severe one, which attended my abandonment of early beliefs. Thinking inconsecutively for myself, with no Freethought literature to guide me save as so much of Paine as was contained in Watson's 'Apology'[21] – a work which has led probably more men to Freethought than it has established in orthodoxy – I slowly reasoned myself out of orthodoxy, and only retained a vague belief in a somewhat abstract Deity, with, I think, an equally attenuated notion of immortality.[22]

Robertson's falling from faith may not have been quite as smooth a process as this account suggests. His parents were apparently very religious,[23] and consequently pained by this gradual and quite irreversible change of opinion.[24] However, the secularist circles in which Robertson now moved provided a strong stimulus to throw off any final remnants of religious belief.

Edinburgh was not a particularly active centre of secularism, but there was a vigorous circle of Bradlaugh–followers, led by John Lees, a rope and twine manufacturer who was a vice–president of Bradlaugh's National Secular Society (N.S.S.), and a close personal friend of its leader.[25] Robertson joined the Edinburgh Secular Society, and in the early 1880s he became the leader of a group of young fellow secularists, who drew attention to themselves by their vigorous propaganda of freethought and secularism in the face of unbending Scottish orthodoxy. In addition to Robertson, the members of this group were Thomas Carlaw Martin, a Post Office administrator, who later became editor of the *Scottish Leader* and was given a knighthood for his editorial services in support of the legal case for the union of the United Presbyterian and Free Churches; W.E. Snell, of the Queen's Remembrancer's Office; Joseph Mazzini Wheeler, an accomplished scholar of freethought, whose mental instability

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[21] Richard Watson (1737–1816) was the author of *Apology for the Bible, in Answer to Thomas Paine* (1796).

[22] J.M. Robertson, *National Reformer* (8 February 1891), pp. 83–4.

[23] Arthur Moss, 'Famous Freethinkers I have known – VIII', *Freethinker* (5 September 1915), p. 570.

[24] Robertson to Edward Henry, 16 June 1931. This letter is a reply to a young man who was struggling with religious doubts and wrote to Robertson for advice. Somewhat surprisingly, the died–in–the–wool and widely feared rationalist counselled him 'not be aggressive about your opinions, contenting yourself with defending them when they are attacked.' The letter was acquired in 1995 by the then Secretary of the National Secular Society, Mr. T. Mullins, and is now in the N.S.S. archive at the Bishopsgate Library, London.

[25] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 70.

doubtless contributed to bringing an early end to his unhappy life;[26] and John Lees, at whose house the group met regularly. Allied with this group, though not actual members, were William Archer, who had moved to London in 1878, and Patrick Geddes, an Irish polymath who later distinguished himself as a biologist, educationist, and town planner.

This energetic brotherhood of freethinkers was not without its Swinburnian touches. One of its conventions was to wear hyacinthine locks, to have whiskers and a beard, and, for the platform, to sport a brown or black velvet jacket. Malcolm Quin, freethinker and Positivist, recorded the following impression of a meeting with Robertson in 1881:

> Another of the bright-witted and capable Edinburgh Secularists whom I then met for the first time was a dark-haired, dark-eyed, soft-spoken young man from the North named J.M. Robertson. He was then assistant-editor of the *Edinburgh Evening News,*[27] and was already as alert in mind, and as remorselessly keen in speech, if not quite as omniscient, as he has since proved himself to be to a wide public. We always had a free discussion after my lectures, as after others; and if Robertson had any share in it – as I think he must have had – I am sure I must have suffered much from his dexterous spear-thrusts which then, as ever afterwards, he could give to his opponents, either in print or on the platform.[28]

At John Lees's house at Portobello by the Firth of Forth Robertson met Hypatia and Alice Bradlaugh, Charles Bradlaugh's daughters and co-workers in the cause of secularism. Hypatia, who became one of Robertson's closest friends and allies, later recalled nostalgically how Robertson would sometimes shock the devout neighbours by taking boats out on the water on Sundays. He was, after all, a highlander from the Isle of Arran, and there was apparently little about a boat he did not know.[29]

Although we do not know for certain whether Robertson ever met Bradlaugh himself at Lees's house, there is little doubt that he soon attracted the great man's attention. Robertson was starting to contribute regularly to the *National Reformer*, the official N.S.S. organ and Bradlaugh's main mouthpiece, as well as to two other freethought ventures: *Progress*, edited by the leading freethinker G.W. Foote, and *Our Corner*, edited by Mrs Annie

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[26] For Wheeler, see Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, pp. 104–5.

[27] Actually, Robertson was leader writer, not assistant-editor.

[28] Malcolm Quin, *Memoirs of a Positivist* (London, 1924), p. 66.

[29] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, 'John Mackinnon Robertson: a Tribute', *Literary Guide* (July 1926), pp. 111–12.

Besant.[30] In both *Progress* (June 1884) and the *National Reformer* (15 June, 27 July 1884) he reported on a debate he had attended in London at St James's Hall on 17 April between Bradlaugh and H.M. Hyndman, the Marxist Socialist and leader of the Social Democratic Federation. On his return to Edinburgh he organized a meeting to discuss the case of secularism vs Socialism, at which he defended Socialism against his friend John Lees, the chairman of the Edinburgh Secular Society.[31] From the correspondence in the *National Reformer* which followed the Bradlaugh–Hyndman debate we learn that Robertson described himself as a 'Socialist and Pessimist',[32] but his Socialist position was in fact so close to Bradlaugh's brand of Radical Liberalism that from the very first, Bradlaugh undoubtedly saw him as an ally rather than an opponent.

Robertson had made his first brief visit to London in the first week of July 1882, when he and his Edinburgh friend Joseph Wheeler accompanied G.W. Foote on a walking tour through the South London countryside. The three had an extremely pleasant day walking around Kew and Richmond, while discussing a long letter by William Archer from Italy, and reciting poetry, much to the bewilderment of 'the birds, the sheep, the cattle, and stray pedestrians'. Far less pleasant, however, was Foote's return home, where he found on his desk a summons from the Lord Mayor, commanding his attendance at the Mansion House next Tuesday, to answer a charge of blasphemy.[33] In the issue of Foote's militantly atheist periodical the *Freethinker* for 28 May 1882, Foote had published an article with the provocative title 'What shall I do to be damned' by William Heaford, as well as an irreverent cartoon depicting God entitled 'Divine Illumination'. Foote was treated no better than a common criminal, and sentenced to a year in Holloway prison, which he duly served. Incidents like these, by no means uncommon and indicative of the notoriety of secularists in the eyes of the establishment, must have further strengthened Robertson in his resolve to dedicate his life to the freethought cause. To a combative spirit like his, here was a cause clearly worth fighting for.

It was Bradlaugh's closest co–worker, the remarkable Annie Besant, who was finally instrumental in Robertson's removal to London in 1884. For a while, Mrs Besant had been looking for a replacement of the dedicated but utterly unreliable Edward Aveling on the staff of the *National Reformer*. Not only was Aveling a notorious womanizer, he also owed Bradlaugh large sums of money, which he never repaid. George Bernard Shaw, who knew Aveling all

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[30] Robertson's contributions to *Progress* as well as to *Our Corner* start with Volume I, 1883.

[31] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 234.

[32] 'Correspondence', *National Reformer* (15 June 1884), p. 402.

[33] G.W. Foote, 'Prisoner for Blasphemy.– II', *Progress*, 4 (1884), p. 58.

too well, summed up his character in a nutshell: 'If it came to giving one's life for a cause one could count on Aveling even if he carried all our purses with him to the scaffold.'[34] In the autumn of 1884 Annie Besant travelled to Edinburgh, and succeeded in persuading Robertson to come with her to London and become assistant–editor of the *National Reformer*, which he was to remain until Bradlaugh's death in 1891.

In October 1884, Annie Besant presided over Robertson's farewell party, organized by the Edinburgh Secular Society. His secularist friends did not like to see their talented friend go, and it turned out to be a moving occasion for all involved. Robertson was presented with a handsome testimonial (quite appropriately 'a beautiful inkstand, stationary case, gold pen and pencil, and other requisites of a writing table'), and the hard–headed Scotsman replied in a emotional speech, his voice almost breaking at times.[35] Rare instances like these show us that the stern rationalist exterior Robertson presented to the outside world may well have hidden an unexpectedly sentimental soul (although he would undoubtedly have objected to the use of that particular term). That he revealed such feelings only to those who shared his convictions is hardly surprising in the light of his life's mission. To display emotional 'weakness' to his ideological enemies would only have undermined his position as an unwavering champion of the rationalist cause. Among his friends, he could afford to lower his guard.

As soon as he found himself under Mrs Besant's wings, Robertson was not given much time to succumb to nostalgia. On arrival in London at St Pancras Station, he was taken straight to Mrs Besant's vast house at 19 Avenue Road, where, for the next three years, he was to be a lodger.[36] Apart from his involvement in the *National Reformer*, Robertson was bent on making Mrs Besant's *Our Corner* as successful as possible, and after a ramble in Windsor Park with Mrs Besant shortly after his arrival in London, it was decided that his versatile friend Patrick Geddes should be asked to contribute.[37] Having thus found his footing in London, it was not long before he became one of the pillars of the secularist movement, and a loyal, though never uncritical, disciple of Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant, its renowned leaders.

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[34] Quoted from Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 106.

[35] Annie Besant, 'Farewell to Mr Robertson at Edinburgh', *National Reformer* (12 October 1884), p. 247.

[36] Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant. A Biography* (Oxford, 1992), p. 171. As source, Taylor mentions a note, probably by Arthur Bonner, in the Bradlaugh Bonner Family Papers.

[37] Robertson to Geddes, 1 November 1884; Robertson's correspondence with Patrick Geddes is in the National Library of Scotland, Geddes Papers, MS 10522, f. 239; 10523, f. 229; 10524, ff. 3–9, 115, 137; 10535, f. 138; 10548, f. 183. Note that Taylor misquotes this letter by substituting 'Wimbledon Commons' for 'Windsor Park'.

Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, and Secularism

The early 1880s were the years in which the secularist movement reached its climax, and Charles Bradlaugh, president of the National Secular Society, achieved unprecedented popularity as a champion of the people. What did this movement, of which Robertson was at one time such an eminent exponent, stand for?

Edward Royle, Robertson's most recent and prominent successor as a historian of freethought and secularism, provides the following outline:

> The Secularists were a relatively small group of men and women from the working classes whose mission was a radical restructuring of society by peaceful means. Their fundamental belief was that the evils of contemporary society were attributable to the baneful effects of religion, and their aim was to discredit Christianity and those social institutions which depended upon it. They were republicans in a country increasingly devoted to its Queen; and atheists in a society which, outwardly at least, was profoundly religious. Their hero was Thomas Paine.[38]

The definitions of and distinctions between freethought and secularism present somewhat of a problem. Fundamentally, freethought and secularism are both before all else anti–religious ideologies. Robertson himself defined freethought as follows:

> . . . a conscious reaction against some phase or phases of conventional or traditional doctrine in religion – on the one hand, a claim to think freely, in the sense not of disregard for logic but of special loyalty to it, on problems to which the past course of things has given a great intellectual and practical importance; on the other hand, the actual practice of such thinking.[39]

In practice, 'freethought' may be looked upon as a generic term, covering a wide variety of militant strands of unbelief, whereas 'secularism' is usually used to refer more specifically to the popular system of organized non–religion which emerged in the 1850s and soon became identified with Bradlaugh, the N.S.S., and the *National Reformer*.

English freethought could point to a long and colourful tradition, of which Robertson provides a lucid summary in his short biography of Bradlaugh:

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[38] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. x.

[39] *A Short History of Freethought* (London, 1899), p. 5.

> English freethought, which began to take systematic critical form in the *Discourse of Freethinking* of Anthony Collins in 1713, and is recorded by responsible witnesses to have reached the working classes even in the age of the Restoration, became a matter of platform propaganda as early as Peter Annet, in 1739. If such polemic was overlaid in the latter half of the eighteenth century by new popular politics, it was powerfully reconstituted by Paine's *Age of Reason*, which seems to have been about as widely circulated as his *Rights of Man*; and the Radicalism of the first half of the nineteenth century went hand in hand with all manner of freethinking. The movement of Robert Owen was impregnated with it; and no one who mingled long with the Chartists could fail to meet with it there.[40]

In the 1850s, George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906) tried hard to erect a national secular movement on the ruins of Owenite Socialism and Chartism. The movement was to have 'the social aims of Owenism but without its early theological debunking or its later canting promises, the political aims of Chartism without its working-class prejudices or bogus land schemes, and the moral aspirations of Christian Socialism without being tied to an incredible creed.'[41] Although Holyoake succeeded in laying the foundations of the movement, he was not the type of powerful and charismatic leader who could bring unity to a highly diverse and fragmented movement. His freethinking critics found him too cautious and eager to compromise, too much concerned about respectability in the eyes of the middle classes, and not sufficiently loyal to the militant freethought tradition of the first half of the nineteenth century,[42] which, as Robertson points out, had its own history of propagandistic literature:

> Richard Carlile, who took up the sale of Paine's works when they were being officially suppressed, and who underwent nine years' imprisonment between 1819 and 1835, was one of the most energetic of democratic publishers, putting in cheap circulation a multitude of English, French, and American treatises, with Shelley's *Queen Mab*, of which the jurisprudence of the time refused to let the poet control the circulation. An almost continual succession of Radical and Rationalist journals, mostly of book-page size, had pushed such literature home during a quarter of a century. Meantime there had appeared in 1838 Charles Hennell's *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity*, praised

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[40] *Charles Bradlaugh* (London, 1920), p. 7.

[41] David Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh* (London, 1971), p. 31.

[42] Edward Royle, *Radical Politics 1790–1900. Religion and Unbelief* (London, 1971), pp. 54–5.

> by Strauss, of which the sober documentary scrutiny was promptly assimilated by the popular propagandists. In 1846 came George Eliot's translation of Strauss's *Life of Jesus*.[43]

In fact, the very neologism 'secularism', coined by Holyoake to avoid the immediate and hazardous association with atheism, is proof of his essential willingness to compromise.

Although his task proved uncommonly hard and he never achieved the unity he strove for, Charles Bradlaugh, and not Holyoake, was the man who proved able to focus the movement into an influential social and political force. In contrast with Holyoake's politics of compromise, Bradlaugh preached open warfare, and his warcry was one that many secularists and Radicals all over the country were eager to rally to. It was not long before the average Victorian looked upon him as an alarming threat to established order and morality, and his advocacy of atheism, republicanism, Neo–Malthusian birth–control, and far–reaching political reform made him a veritable devil incarnate in the eyes of many an anxious Christian moralist. A threat to the establishment he certainly was, but there was nothing infernal about him. He may have preached atheism, but he was really an almost Puritanical public moralist of the typically Victorian kind; he may have advocated republicanism, but he was an ardent patriot and dedicated constitutionalist. His campaign for birth control was an attempt to liberate women from the straitjacket of constant childbearing, and had nothing to do with the propagation of free sex, of which he was incessantly accused. Bradlaugh aimed at reform, not revolution, and in politics the secularists found themselves on the extreme Radical left of the Liberal party. Although he was followed with a critical eye, William Ewart Gladstone was for many of them a name to be mentioned with reverence.

Bradlaugh was born in Hoxton, North London, in 1833.[44] His father was a poor solicitor's clerk, who (like Robertson's parents) could not afford to send his son to school after his twelfth year. Charles soon took a precocious interest in politics, and in his spare time he read widely and eagerly, and attended political meetings. When he was fifteen years old, he experienced the first of his many clashes with organized Christianity. He was then a Sunday school teacher, and when, in preparation for his Confirmation, he studied the Thirty–Nine Articles and the Gospels, and detected some disturbing discrepancies, he dutifully reported his findings to his superintendent, the Reverend J.G. Packer. The latter was outraged by these dangerous atheistic leanings, and Charles was suspended from school for three months. Thus

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[43] Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh*, pp. 8–9.

[44] All biographical information about Charles Bradlaugh presented here is based on Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*.

relieved from his church–going duties on Sundays, he now had ample time to attend the open–air meetings at Bonner's Fields in Bethnal Green. Here he listened to impassioned freethought lecturers who confirmed him in his emerging religious doubts. A further appeal to the Reverend Packer brought about Bradlaugh's removal from his house.

He now found refuge with Eliza Sharples, the common–law widow of Richard Carlile, the foremost promoter of British republicanism in the early nineteenth century. Now finding himself at the core of freethought activity, he soon shook off what vestiges of Christian faith he had left. His new, atheistic beliefs, however, lost him his job, and he got deeper and deeper into debt. Seeing no other way out, he joined the army in 1850, and went to Ireland, where his experiences sowed the seeds for a lifelong interest in the Irish cause. In 1853, a legacy enabled him to buy himself out, and he found himself a job as an attorney's clerk. Since he did not want to compromise his employer, he now undertook his propagandistic missions under the name 'Iconoclast', which he would continue to use until 1868. His work at two law offices provided him with extensive legal knowledge, an extremely useful asset in his secularist career. A formidable orator, he devoted his spare time to freethought and Radical lecturing, and rapidly became very popular with London audiences. After a successful provincial lecture tour in 1858, his popularity spread to the country as well.

By the late 1850s, he had replaced Holyoake as the acknowledged secularist leader. In 1862 he became the sole proprietor of the *National Reformer*, a new weekly secularist newspaper that was originally based in Sheffield but was soon transferred to London. In 1866, Bradlaugh took the editorship into his own hands, and turned the *National Reformer* into the official organ of the secularist movement. In that same year, Bradlaugh founded the N.S.S., of which he was to be president until 1890. Although his leadership was never undisputed and he had many secularist enemies who accused him of despotism, he was in effect the embodiment of secularism, and after his death became what may well be called its secular Saint.

To John Robertson, there would be no greater example in life, and Bradlaugh's teachings provided the foundation on which he built much of his own work. In an emotional 'In Memoriam' after Bradlaugh's death, he mourned the loss of a man who had, in many ways, been like a father to him, and whose example he felt under an intense obligation to emulate:

> For my own small part, I should be already false to his example if I did not avow that I can hardly conceive myself coming to aim at a life of straightforward doctrine even on a small scale, if this man had not by his dauntless sincerity both shown what degree of sincerity is possible and made the exercise of it easy. Verily, with

> his stripes are we made whole. Since he forced his fearless way through the beast–peopled jungle, the path is broad and free; and we should be unworthy of having ever known him if we let the rank growth unite again, and the creatures of fang and sting regain complete possession.[45]

Bertrand Russell's description in his *Autobiography* of Robertson as 'the man on whom Bradlaugh's mantle has fallen' was entirely accurate.[46] Robertson's militant atheism, his views on the history of Christianity, his Neo–Malthusianism, almost his entire Liberal ideology, all these were inspired or engendered by Bradlaugh's example, and treasured by Robertson as a most precious inheritance.

In 1874, the secularist cause gained a remarkable acquisition in the person of Mrs Annie Besant (1847–1933).[47] A year before, Mrs Besant had shaken herself loose from her disastrous marriage to the Reverend Frank Besant, who has gone down into history (his wife made sure of that) as the rigid embodiment of all the Victorian values which constrained women in their freedom. Like Bradlaugh, she had read herself out of orthodox religion, much to her husband's distress. Her first contact with the world of freethought occurred in 1872, when she was visiting her mother in London. There she listened to the unorthodox preaching of Charles Voysey at St George's Hall, and became acquainted with Moncure D. Conway, the equally unorthodox minister of the South Place Chapel. She found a mentor in the person of Thomas Scott, a deistic publisher, for whom she wrote an anonymous tract on *The Deity of Jesus of Nazareth*. After her legal separation from her husband in 1873, she felt free to break with conventions as she pleased. In July 1874 she bought a copy of Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*, and immediately liked its opinions. She wrote to Bradlaugh asking if she could join the N.S.S., and on receiving an encouraging reply, she attended a lecture at Bradlaugh's Hall of Science in Old Street, and was overwhelmed by his powerful presence on the platform. Three weeks later, on 25 August, she delivered her first public lecture, at the Co–operative Institute in Castle Street. August 30 saw the publication of her first weekly 'Daybreak' column in the *National Reformer*, under the pseudonym of 'Ajax'. Her career in secularism was now officially launched, and it was not long before she became, in fact, second in command

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[45] *National Reformer* (8 February 1891), pp. 83–4.

[46] Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 2 vols (London 1967), I, p. 167.

[47] For Mrs Besant's highly turbulent life and career, see: Annie Besant, *An Autobiography* (London, 1893); Arthur H. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* (Chicago, 1960); *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* (Chicago, 1963); Taylor, *Annie Besant. A Biography*.

to Bradlaugh. In 1875 she became Vice–President of the N.S.S. and Bradlaugh's closest co–worker. From February 1877, she sub–edited the *National Reformer*, and she became co–editor in May 1881, a position she held until October 1887.

From her very first appearance on the platform, Mrs Besant proved to be an extremely valuable asset to the freethought cause. She was an uncommonly gifted platform–speaker, and as such achieved great popularity among freethinkers all over the country. Missionary work was an essential and inevitable element of freethought, and only when it could rely on effective missionaries did the secularist movement really thrive. When the decline of the movement began to set in around the second half of the 1880s, G.W. Foote, the later president of the N.S.S., attributed it to 'the want of good lecturers'.[48] Conversely, the success of secularism in the first half of the 1880s is undoubtedly partly attributable to the smoothness with which the N.S.S. propaganda machine then ran. In 1883, there were no fewer than ten appointed lecturers, whereas by 1891, the number had dropped dramatically to only one.[49] When Robertson replaced Edward Aveling on the staff of the *National Reformer* in 1884, that periodical could boast of a number of highly qualified contributors, which ensured that the printed side of propaganda was well covered.[50] But although the efforts of these dedicated propagandists certainly contributed to the success of secularism at this time, the actual cause has to be sought elsewhere.

Bradlaugh was always well aware that success for the secularist cause had to be achieved through the channels of political Radicalism, in other words: through parliament. From 1868, he made several attempts to win the Northampton constituency, but it was not until his fourth attempt at the 1880 elections that he was finally successful. Before he could take his rightful seat in Parliament, however, one barrier was still to be crossed: the oath of allegiance, which ran as follows: 'I do swear that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to her Majesty Queen Victoria, Her Heirs and Successors, according to Law. So help me God.'[51] Bradlaugh notified the Speaker and the Clerk to the House of Commons that he believed that he had the legal right to affirm, and did not have to stoop to hypocrisy and take the oath. This resulted in a parliamentary struggle which lasted until 1886, when the opposition finally gave way, and which showed clearly just how dangerous a threat Bradlaugh appeared in the

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[48] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 150.
[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 151–2.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 158.
[51] Quoted by Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, p. 194.

eyes of the establishment.[52] Bradlaugh's opponents, numbering among them prominent politicians like Randolph Churchill and Stafford Northcote, attempted to break him financially, and to undermine his reputation in every possible way. The effect was ultimately the exact opposite of what they tried to achieve. The 'Bradlaugh case', as it was called, became a *cause célèbre*, and Bradlaugh himself a popular hero. The secularist movement was never to rise again to the heights it achieved during Bradlaugh's struggle to enter parliament. The N.S.S. reached its peak in 1883 and 1884,[53] while from the mid–1880s, a gradual decline set in which proved unstoppable. Secularism, firmly rooted in the Liberal–Radical tradition, had to give way to a more radically reformist movement: Socialism.

Robertson's Bradlaugh Years: 1884–1891

Robertson not only replaced Edward Aveling on the staff of the *National Reformer*, he also replaced him in the triumvirate Aveling had formed with Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant. Robertson made countless contributions to the *National Reformer*, thereby allowing Bradlaugh to concentrate on his parliamentary career. He also became, as we have seen, Annie Besant's right–hand man on *Our Corner*, of which she was the sole proprietor.

Initially, *Our Corner* tried to approach its missionary message from a popular, family oriented angle. There was a separate corner for a variety of subjects: Politics, Young Folks, Art, etc. After 1885, when Mrs Besant joined the Fabian Society, its slant became more serious and political, and in 1886–87, it turned into a Socialist magazine, while retaining a strong interest in literature. For Robertson, *Our Corner* became the most important outlet for his literary material, and, showing that his aesthetic instincts were still alive, he also published a number of poems in it. The following is a typical sample of the kind of youthful poetical lapses Robertson perpetrated in these days:

> To Schubert
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> Son of the morning! who long ago
> Lit up my life with your glamour so;
> Changing the past to a land of dream,

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[52] For the fullest and most recent account of Bradlaugh's parliamentary struggle, see Walter L. Arnstein, *The Bradlaugh Case: Atheism, Sex, and Politics among the Late Victorians* (Columbia, 1983). Robertson's own, naturally more biassed account appears in H. Bradlaugh Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh: a Record of his Life and Work. With an account of his parliamentary struggle, politics, and teachings by John M. Robertson*, 2 vols (London, 1894). A more concise account by Robertson can be found in his *Charles Bradlaugh* (London, 1920).

[53] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 36.

Where sorrow gathered a silver gleam,
And lingering love seemed to lose its fire
In the glow of a nameless, new desire;
Till life itself seemed a lesser thing
Than the melody that you made it sing –
You who transfigured all for me
In the radiance of strange harmony,
Till with all the world I grew content,
As at very worst but a kindly tent
Screening me from a blaze of blue
Too intense to live in – here come you
Breaking my heart with a chord or two![54]

After the 1880s, Robertson seems to have completely abandoned his attempts to write poetry, no doubt also because he was well aware that his real strengths lay elsewhere. As to *Our Corner*, its gradual shift towards Socialism was entirely in keeping with the changing political views of its proprietress. Partly, this was due to the influence of an illustrious figure with whom Robertson too came into close and not always harmonious contact: George Bernard Shaw.[55]

It seems likely that Robertson first met Shaw, who was the same age, in his capacity as editorial assistant of *Our Corner*. Mrs Besant had come to the conclusion that Shaw was not the 'loafer' he had proclaimed himself to be in a lecture at the South Place Institute in the beginning of May 1884, but was in fact 'very hard–working' and quite poor, and therefore worthy of patronage.[56] She decided to offer him space in *Our Corner* to publish the novels he had been peddling unsuccessfully with publishers of more conventional repute. Robertson may well have had a hand in this decision too. In an overview of the literature of 1884 in the *National Reformer* of December 1884, Robertson offered unusually high praise of Shaw's fifth novel, *An Unsocial Socialist*:

> On the whole, the most noteworthy piece of fiction I have lately seen has been the story entitled "An Unsocial Socialist", by Mr George Bernard Shaw, which has just been concluded in the magazine *To–day*. There is capital work in that novel – insight, brilliance of style and pith of dialogue; and the conclusion struck me as the most stringent and striking application of the cynical

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[54] *Our Corner*, 5 (1885), p. 47.

[55] For a more extensive account of the relationship between Robertson and Shaw, see Odin Dekkers, 'Robertson and Shaw: An "Unreasonable Friendship"', *English Literature in Transition*, 39 (1996), pp. 431–49.

[56] Annie Besant, 'Daybreak', *National Reformer* (25 May 1884), p. 359; Annie Besant, *An Autobiography* (London, 1893), p. 303.

> method I had seen. . . . It is really abreast of the thinking of the day – perhaps on that account too advanced for many readers.[57]

This is obviously the kind of review that may well spark off a friendship, and Shaw was grateful for Robertson's glowing words. When Macmillan rejected *An Unsocial Socialist* for publication, inviting him to write something 'of a more substantial kind', Shaw referred to Robertson as the one reviewer 'who really took the book in.'[58]

The question to be solved was now: which of Shaw's remaining novels should *Our Corner* publish? This was debated by Robertson and Mrs Besant in the beginning of 1885. Robertson's attempt to convince Mrs Besant that 'the *Irrational Knot* is the least likely of your [Shaw's] novels to suit us' evoked a half playful, half irritated letter from Shaw, in which he asserted vigorously that 'the *Irrational Knot* is very long, and highly moral, and deeply interesting. A child can understand it, and a stern man can weep over it (if he likes).'[59] Notwithstanding Robertson's preference for *Love Among the Artists*, it was Mrs Besant's favourite, *The Irrational Knot*, which was finally serialized in *Our Corner* from April 1885 to February 1887.[60]

For this period, Shaw's diaries record frequent meetings with Robertson.[61] They had a mutual friend in William Archer, and they both spent many long days studying in the Reading–Room of the British Museum. After Shaw's first dramatic encounter with Annie Besant at the Dialectical Society on January 21, 1885, at which she unexpectedly defended Shaw's advocacy of Socialism,[62] Shaw could often be found in the evenings at her house in St. John's Wood, where Robertson was a lodger. There, the three of them had long discussions in which Socialism undoubtedly figured as an important theme. Under Robertson's influence, Annie Besant had begun to adopt a more favourable attitude towards Socialism. In her usual, orotund style she writes in her *Autobiography*: 'The inclusion of John Robertson in the staff of the *Reformer* brought a highly intellectual Socialist into closer touch with us, and slowly I

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[57] J.M. Robertson, 'Literature in 1884', *National Reformer* (28 December 1884), p. 453.

[58] Shaw to Macmillan & Co., 14 January 1885. Quoted from *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1874–1897*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London, 1965), p. 111.

[59] Shaw to Robertson, 19 January 1885. *Ibid.*, pp. 112–13.

[60] *Love Among the Artists* was eventually published in *Our Corner* from November 1887 to December 1888.

[61] *Bernard Shaw: The Diaries 1885–1897*, ed. Stanley Weintraub, 2 vols (University Park and London, 1986).

[62] *Shaw: An Autobiography. 1856–1898*, ed. Stanley Weintraub (New York, 1969), p. 141.

found that the case for Socialism was intellectually complete and ethically beautiful.'[63]

Robertson himself hovered on the fringe of the Fabian Society, without apparently actually becoming a member. On 9, 10, and 11 June 1886, the Fabian Society organized its first conference, at the South Place Institute in London. Its aim was 'to discuss the present commercial system, and the better utilisation of national wealth for the benefit of the community'. On the first day, Robertson argued against Sidney Webb's view 'as to the non–cultivation of poor soils', while on the third day, he read a well–received paper entitled 'a Scheme of Taxation'.[64] Shaw later wrote that in this paper, Robertson 'anticipated much of what was subsequently adopted as the Fabian program.'[65] The reporter from *Progress* described Robertson's delivery as 'cool, dignified, and gentlemanly', as well as 'solid, temperate and conscientious', aptly contrasting it with 'the dry Irish witticism of Mr Bernard Shaw, whose pleasant, half–ironical smile makes us forgive nature for having endowed him with a deathly pale face, like that of the average vegetarian.'[66]

Although at this time Robertson still sympathized with the Socialist ideal, and in spite of any contribution he may have made to the Fabian programme, he was never a Socialist in the sense that he believed in state monopoly or revolution. To Robertson, only gradual and painstaking reform could bring the founding of the Socialist state any nearer. His immediate concern was always with the social betterment of the here and now, and he had little time for the founding of a Utopia at some remote point in the future. Mrs Besant, however, preferred political ideas that soared up into the cloudy sky to those which remained firmly rooted in humble soil, and it was not long before she was convinced by Shaw to make those final steps towards Socialism to which Robertson would not acquiesce. This finally resulted in a painful breach between her and Bradlaugh, who rightly perceived Socialism as in direct competition with the secularist movement for the favour of the general public. In October 1887, Mrs Besant resigned as co–editor of the *National Reformer*, leaving Robertson with much of the editorial burden on his hands, especially now that Bradlaugh was preoccupied with his parliamentary duties.[67]

In the many discussions Shaw had with Robertson, whether about Socialism or any other subject, he must have found the Scotsman a more than worthy

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[63] Besant, *An Autobiography*, p. 304.

[64] 'The Fabian Society and Socialist Notes', *Our Corner*, 8 (1886), p. 61. See also: A.M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics 1884–1918* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 23.

[65] *Shaw: An Autobiography 1856–1898*, p. 134.

[66] W. Greathead, 'The Fabian Conference', *Progress*, 6 (1886), pp. 323, 326.

[67] Taylor, *Annie Besant. A Biography*, p. 188; Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*, p. 249.

opponent. Robertson always had his encyclopedic knowledge at his fingertips, and he loved a good fight, as many of his friends (not to mention his enemies) could confirm.[68] With Shaw he 'sparred', but not always entirely good–naturedly. The mixture of playfulness and irritation noted above is characteristic of their overall relationship. In a letter to Shaw dated 9 February 1885, Robertson offers hair–splitting criticism of *The Irrational Knot*, suggesting, for instance, that Shaw change the title:

> 'Irrational Knot' is irrational: it is knot in the knature of knots to be rational or irrational. Why 'Knot'? (Don't retort with Why not?). 'Mr Conolly's Experiments' – would that do?[69]

This looks conspicuously like an uncharacteristic attempt on Robertson's part to adopt a tone of Shavian flippancy, which he cannot have felt entirely comfortable with. After sending Shaw the manuscript of a play he had written,[70] he was driven to defend himself with an admission of failure: 'As regards the play, the damned thing wasn't worth discussion. You haven't mentioned half its faults.'

Interestingly, he then proposed to Shaw to combine their strengths and cooperate in a literary venture:

> Suppose we do a play together? But the trouble is that neither of us is a plottist. Only I would keep your plot within the bounds of common–sense – my own Quixotism was perfectly conscious.[71]

Robertson must have been aware of Shaw's earlier attempt to write a play with William Archer, their mutual friend. In that attempted collaboration, Shaw's supposed inability to come up with a good plot had also played a role. In the summer of 1884, Archer had outlined to Shaw the following master plan: Archer was to provide the plot, which he borrowed from a 'twaddling cup–and–saucer comedy' entitled *Ceinture Dorée* by Emile Augier, while Shaw could try and put a sparkle in the dialogue. Shaw started work on 18 August, and by November he had completed the first two acts, but found it impossible to carry on.[72] Now, only a few months later, we find Robertson

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[68] Macleod Yearsley, 'Further Tributes to J.M. Robertson', *Literary Guide* (March 1933), p. 54; John A. Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic* (London, 1938), p. 50.

[69] Robertson to Shaw, 9 February 1885. Robertson's correspondence with Bernard Shaw is in the British Library, Add. MS 50548, ff. 115–33.

[70] The manuscript, unfortunately, does not seem to have survived.

[71] Robertson to Shaw, 11 March 1885.

[72] Archer's account of their ill–fated joint–venture, originally published in *The World* of 14 December 1892, can be found in *Shaw. An Autobiography 1856–1898*, pp. 263–5.

trying to get Shaw to embark on a similar venture. What Shaw thought of this plan has not been recorded, but one can imagine that after one misguided attempt in the recent past he was not so eager to run the risk of another failure. Even if he had been considering a successor to Archer at all, his distinct lack of praise for Robertson's own efforts indicates that he would hardly have thought of Robertson as his first choice.

Given the fact that Robertson had written so highly of *An Unsocial Socialist*, Shaw may well have been unpleasantly surprised by Robertson's review of his fourth novel, *Cashel Byron's Profession*.[73] Robertson pronounced Shaw guilty of 'dazzling his generation' rather than 'conquering it' and did not conceal his disappointment in Shaw's literary development. Shaw's diaries indicate that, after reading this review, Shaw sat down to write a long, quite possibly indignant letter to Mrs Besant. As it turned out, this would not remain the only critical blow Shaw had to receive at Robertson's hands. In the *National Reformer* of 6 December 1891, Robertson reviewed Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism*,[74] in which the Irishman had attacked the rationalist position by contending, among other things, that

> when Darwin, Haeckel, Helmholtz, Young, and the rest, popularized here among the middle class by Tyndall and Huxley, and among the proletariat by the lectures of the National Secular Society, have taught you all they know, you are still as utterly at a loss to explain the fact of consciousness as you would have been in the days when you were satisfied with Chambers' *Vestiges of Creation*.[75]

Robertson, as always, did not mince his words and wrote off Shaw in his review as a light-weight thinker, incapable of deep philosophical analysis and always ready to let his latest whim take control of his mind; in short, a bad reasoner who 'must needs work in his own way, and say just what he feels for the time being.'[76] When a year and half later he reviewed Shaw's first play *Widowers' Houses*,[77] his general verdict was mild, but he again attacked the author for the 'fitful and wayward way he probes life.'[78] Clearly, he could not easily forgive Shaw for attempting to undermine the rationalist creed.

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[73] J.M. Robertson, 'Cashel Byron's Profession', *Our Corner*, 7 (1886), pp. 301–5.

[74] J.M. Robertson, 'Critical Chat: The Quintessence of Ibsenism', *National Reformer* (6 December 1891), pp. 358–9.

[75] G.B. Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London, 1891), p. 14.

[76] Robertson, 'Critical Chat: The Quintessence of Ibsenism', p. 359.

[77] Gigadibs Jr. [i.e. J.M. Robertson], 'Mr. G.B. Shaw's Play', *National Reformer* (16 July 1893), pp. 34–5.

[78] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

There were, however, no hard feelings on Shaw's side. He always valued Robertson very highly, and praised his honesty and 'exceptional ability' in letters to his friends.[79] There is little or no factual evidence for the suggestion made by Stanley Weintraub, the editor of Shaw's diaries, that Robertson 'professed friendship and admiration for Shaw but saw him as a rival for Annie Besant's favors and inserted unfavorable criticism into everything he wrote and said about Shaw and his work.'[80] Robertson was perhaps often too uncompromising for comfort, but he was certainly above the kind of personal spite suggested by Weintraub, as Shaw himself well recognized.

As far as Annie Besant's favours are concerned, it is true that in Shaw's diaries, Robertson appears to be always at Mrs Besant's side, almost as if they were a married couple. If he is not correcting proofs with her, he is escorting her around town on one of her numerous engagements. In an autobiographical note, Shaw wrote: 'There was a different leading man every time: Bradlaugh, Robertson, Aveling, Shaw, and Herbert Burrows. That did not matter.'[81] At this point, Robertson was clearly her new 'leading man', and she could rely on him for support and intellectual stimulus. It seems unlikely, however, that there was any kind of romantic *liaison* between them, or that Robertson wished to establish one. Annie Besant may have referred to Robertson when she wrote complacently to a later 'leading man', W.T. Stead: 'Let us be honest, I have not worked with any man in close intimacy who has not fallen in love with me, but I have managed to steer through and . . . keep my friend.'[82] But what she needed at this point was a reliable and supportive co–worker, not a lover, and Robertson fitted his appointed role to perfection. After Mrs Besant left secularism and Socialism for the misty heights of theosophy, Robertson retained his loyalty to her, in spite of their ideological differences. Mrs Besant was duly grateful and praised Robertson highly in her autobiography for being 'a man of rare ability and culture, somewhat too scholarly for popular propagandism of the most generally effective order, but a man who is a strength to any movement, always on the side of noble living and high thinking, loyal–natured as the true Scot should be, incapable of meanness or treachery, and the most genial and generous of friends.'[83]

Robertson's various activities throughout the 1880s show that he was indeed a powerful force within the secularist and freethought movement. He

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[79] Shaw to E.C. Chapman, 28 July 1891; Shaw to William Archer, 10 November 1891. Quoted from *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1874–1897*, pp. 301, 326.

[80] *Bernard Shaw: The Diaries 1885–1897*, I, p. 163.

[81] *Shaw: An Autobiography 1856–1898*, p. 142.

[82] Annie Besant to W.T. Stead, 17 April 1888. Quoted from Taylor, *Annie Besant. A Biography*, p. 186.

[83] Besant, *An Autobiography*, p. 286.

contributed ceaselessly to the *National Reformer*, *Our Corner*, and G.W. Foote's *Progress*, while making incidental contributions to progressive periodicals such as the *Westminster Review*. Naturally prolific, he had, after all, no other means to earn his living than his pen. Platform speaking gradually took up more and more of his time, and in 1886, he made his first appearance at the Hall of Science as an appointed N.S.S. lecturer.[84] The life of a platform propagandist was far from easy. Royle gives the example of Charles Watts, at one time Bradlaugh's chief ally, who, in 24 days in 1871, travelled 1400 miles, delivered twenty–seven lectures in twelve towns and villages, and held two set debates.[85] Lecturing was always a major part of Robertson's daily existence. He later became an appointed lecturer of the Rationalist Press Association and the South Place Ethical Society, and he also spoke frequently to the many societies he was a member of. J.P. Gilmour, himself a died–in–the–wool freethought activist, gives the following impression of Robertson's lecturing practice:

> In the earlier period of his lecturing career "J.M.R." wrote out his lectures in full; in the middle period he spoke from notes; and latterly there was a reversion to manuscript, chiefly with a view to publication. . . . Even when reading from his manuscript, which from first to last was in a fair, firm, legible, and running penmanship, Robertson's delivery was easy, natural, and effective. His language and feeling would rise to heights of stately, chastened eloquence, but it was never cheaply rhetorical.[86]

Robertson, habitually dressed in his favourite velvet coat, struck a handsome figure on the platform. One of his friends described him as 'of compact, alert physique, with a beautifully shaped head, dark beard and wavy hair, fine eyes and profile, a rich voice, and words that never failed.'[87] He was generally known as 'the handsome Scotsman',[88] and this, combined with his easy eloquence, ensured his success as a lecturer, even if the contents of his lectures may sometimes have been above the heads of his audience. Another friend and freethinker, Arthur Moss, was equally impressed by Robertson's appearance and lecturing prowess:

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[84] 'Rough Notes', *National Reformer* (6 June 1886), p. 361.

[85] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 151.

[86] J.P. Gilmour, '"J.M.R." A Personal Appreciation', *Literary Guide* (February 1933), p. 36.

[87] S.K. Ratcliffe, 'Further Tributes to "J.M.R."', *Literary Guide* (February 1933), p. 38.

[88] Gilmour, '"J.M.R." A Personal Appreciation', p. 36.

> A fine athletic man with handsome, classical features, fine head, jet black hair, bearded like the pard [bard, i.e. Shakespeare], with a most impressive style of address, and splendid argumentative powers, these, added to remarkable erudition, made him a great attraction as a lecturer at various centres throughout the country. I heard him on several occasions, and was always profoundly impressed by his lucid methods of exposition and convincing power of logic. He was also a very skilful debater as a young man, and this power he has developed to an extraordinary degree during his many years of platform experience. His skill in analysing an argument, in dividing and sub–dividing its parts, until he had got to the very heart of it, so to speak, was extremely clever, and then to watch while he exposed its fallacies, soon convinced his hearers that they were listening to a logician and debater of the highest order.[89]

His activities were not limited to writing and lecturing. In 1885, Robertson began to teach a course on Political Economy at the Hall of Science, Bradlaugh's headquarters. A year later, he himself gained first–class passes in 'organic chemistry' and 'electricity and magnetism'.[90] The Hall of Science School had been started in 1879 by Edward Aveling, who, however dubious his reputation may now appear in other respects, was an inspiring and extremely knowledgeable teacher. He was ably assisted by Annie Besant and Bradlaugh's daughters, Alice and Hypatia. In January 1882, Aveling even started a class to prepare candidates for London University matriculation. Initially, the Hall of Science school proved a very successful enterprise; specializing in science subjects,[91] it provided education of a very high standard, mainly for skilled artisans between the ages of twenty and forty. Unfortunately, as secularism gradually lost its public appeal, so did its educational programme. By 1888, there were no longer sufficient pupils to keep the enterprise going.[92]

A letter to Patrick Geddes dated 9 March 1887 indicates that not even John Robertson's capacity for work was unlimited. He complains that he is 'overworking and consequently bilious', but cannot help it because 'it brings in money'. He then unfolds his plans for the future:

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[89] Moss, 'Famous Freethinkers I have known – VIII', p. 571.

[90] 'Hall of Science Classes', *National Reformer* (9 May 1886), p. 295.

[91] In an announcement by the Hall of Science School in the *National Reformer* of 5 September 1886, the following courses were offered: elementary and advanced botany, physiology, biology, mathematics, organic chemistry, inorganic chemistry, electricity and magnetism, geology, physiography, political economy, and sound, light, and heat.

[92] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, pp. 317–19.

> . . . one of these days I'll take flight abroad and settle down somewhere (Athens or Germany?) to produce one of my magnumopuses. I half think the first will be a 'History of Christianity, Sociologically Considered.' How's that for high? But there is the one on economics and the one on politics to do likewise. At thirty it's time to be building, as you know.[93]

As his lengthy bibliography testifies, Robertson would eventually build many a 'magnum opus', although he never did get round to settling quietly abroad. He did manage to travel occasionally, however. In November 1887, Robertson was in Germany, where he stayed with Dr Ludwig Büchner in Darmstadt. One of the purposes of his visit was to perfect his German language skills, which he found uncommonly hard. He admitted to being 'unusually backward in my comprehension of the tongue', and the German language struck him as a 'frightful structure'.[94] It is not clear exactly how long Robertson stayed in Germany, but by June 1888 he was back again in England.[95]

On his return to England, Robertson found Mrs Besant involved in the cause by which she is most frequently remembered: the strike of the girl match workers at the firm of Bryant and May. This time, Mrs Besant's ally on the barricades was the Socialist Herbert Burrows. The actual strike – a protest against the inhumanly low wages paid in the match industry – lasted less than two weeks in July 1888, and Robertson was present among a group of Fabians to offer practical help.[96]

In his absence, the growing involvement between Annie Besant and Shaw had reached a crisis. In his diaries, Shaw recorded how the intimacy between him and Annie had gradually ripened until the beginning of 1887, and had very nearly become an intrigue. In Robertson's absence, Annie offered Shaw an agreement to live at Avenue Road and join in her work, which Shaw, disconcerted by the serious turn their relationship was suddenly taking, refused with a consciousness of having been inconsiderate to her.[97] Was it Annie's infatuation with Shaw that drove Robertson to Germany, as Shaw seems to imply vaguely in his diaries?[98] It does not appear very likely. Even apart from the fact that there is no evidence that Robertson ever wished to 'adventure with

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[93] Robertson to Geddes, 9 March 1887.

[94] Robertson to Geddes, 8 November 1887.

[95] This is indicated by the entry in Shaw's diary for 28 May 1888. See *Bernard Shaw: The Diaries 1885–1897*, I, p. 380.

[96] Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*, pp. 260–1.

[97] *Bernard Shaw: The Diaries 1885–1897*, I, p. 34.

[98] *Ibid.*: 'She having left herself almost alone during her acquaintance with me, she had for example allowed J.M. Robertson, who had boarded in her house, and was deeply attached to her, to go abroad.'

a landlady and employer nine years his senior and already married',[99] few people were less inclined towards escapism than Robertson, while Shaw the philanderer was rather more given to self–promotion.

Robertson now no longer lived in Mrs Besant's house at Avenue Road; he had moved to his own place in Broadhurst Gardens, West Hampstead. Sidney A. Gimson, an important Leicester secularist, recalled happy visits there 'with books everywhere, along the stairs, on the landings, and all over the floors and the walls of the rooms.' The visits were all the merrier because Robertson was apparently an excellent cook! Gimson also remembered him 'giving a realistic representation of a growling bear in a cave under my dining–room table, being violently attacked by my two yelling and delighted little sons.'[100] This brings to the surface a more light–hearted side of Robertson, a side that was unmistakably part of his personality, but was perhaps not allowed much freedom in his later life filled with innumerable weighty causes.

In 1890, Charles Bradlaugh, who was ill and could no longer muster the strength to combine a parliamentary career with his official duties as secularist leader, resigned the presidency of the N.S.S. Although Robertson, as Bradlaugh's most devoted disciple, seemed an obvious choice for his successor, and Bradlaugh did apparently wish to nominate him, he had doubts about Robertson's abilities to organize and direct a Society.[101] So he appointed G.W. Foote, founder and editor of the *Freethinker*, and long–time freethought activist. For the next twenty–five years, it was Foote who presided over the decline of a movement which, even when at its peak, only rarely escaped its marginal status. It seems unlikely that Robertson, had he been president instead of Foote, would have been able to turn the tide. Bradlaugh was right: Robertson was too much of an uncompromising controversialist to provide a new impetus to a movement which had only achieved relative unity through the charismatic personal leadership of Bradlaugh.

Charles Bradlaugh died of Bright's disease on 30 January 1891. Robertson was present at the funeral as one of the six pall–bearers. He had been chosen by his friend Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner to represent British freethought. This did not please Foote, who, perhaps not surprisingly, had turned up at the funeral expecting to occupy the place Robertson had now. Foote later wrote indignantly to Arthur Bonner, Bradlaugh's son–in–law: 'I can hardly suppose an affront was intended to the President of the National Secular Society, or that any one could be disposed to choose, without my comment or knowledge, a

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[99] Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, p. 243.

[100] Sidney A. Gimson, 'Honouring the Rt. Hon. J.M. Robertson On the Seventieth Anniversary of his Birth', *Literary Guide* (January 1927), p. 21.

[101] Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, p. 281.

representative of the Society on that or any other occasion.'[102] But Hypatia preferred Robertson 'as one who loved her Father, was ever loyal and devoted to him, and was most closely connected with him in many ways – and who stood high in his personal affection and esteem.'[103]

The Pre–Parliamentary Years: 1891–1906

The painful incident at Bradlaugh's funeral did little to improve relations between Robertson and Foote, which were strained at the best of times. Things grew even worse when a dispute arose between them over the future of Bradlaugh's Hall of Science in Old Street.[104] Early in 1891, Foote proposed the Bradlaugh Memorial Scheme for the establishment of a Bradlaugh Memorial Hall. Robertson thought Foote's timing ill–advised, since he considered it a more practical tribute to Bradlaugh's memory to settle the considerable business debts the secularist leader had left behind. Nonetheless, Robertson went along with the plan, and the idea was now to look out for a site which could supersede the old Hall of Science. There appeared to be no immediate hurry, since it was generally understood that the building at Old Street had been rented from R.O. Smith in 1868 for a period of thirty years. However, not much later Smith denied that any such agreement had ever existed and threatened to sell his lease in the market unless the secularists were to take over the Hall of Science themselves. Foote now professed himself in favour of securing the old site at all costs, and of diverting the funds of the Bradlaugh Memorial Hall Company to the new National Secular Hall Society.

As a director of the Memorial Hall Company, Robertson was appalled by this sudden change of policy and the underhand tactics he felt Foote was employing in winning over his fellow–secularists to this new scheme. He accused Foote of not having done his utmost to procure an extended lease for the Hall of Science while looking out for a more appropriate site. Organized freethought would not be served by the continuing association with the rowdy, 'music–hall' atmosphere of the Old Street building, in which view Robertson was fully supported by Bradlaugh's daughter Hypatia. Foote and Robertson

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[102] G.W. Foote to A. Bonner, 3 February 1891. Bradlaugh Papers no. 2095, Bishopsgate Library, London.

[103] Annie Besant to G.W. Foote, 4 February 1891. Bradlaugh papers, Bishopsgate Library, London; quoted from Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, p. 290.

[104] The sources for the following account of the Hall of Science dispute are Robertson's articles on the subject in the *National Reformer* of 13 September 1891, 7 February 1892, 21 February 1892, 28 February 1892, 13 March 1892, 29 May 1892, 17 July 1892, 4 June 1893. See also a letter from Robertson to Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, dated Sunday 189– (probably 1892), Bradlaugh Papers no. 2377, Bishopsgate Library, London.

attacked each other savagely in their respective periodicals, the *Freethinker* and the *National Reformer*, and it was not long before the secularists were effectively arranged into two warring factions.

In the *National Reformer* of 4 June 1893, when the dispute had already lasted for two years, Robertson made known his decision to withdraw as a member of the National Secular Society. He felt he could no longer be a member of a society whose President he considered a man 'not very sagacious, who seeks to thrust his will on all points down the Society's throat, threatening resignation (meaning hostility) when opposed either on policy or on principle, and who at the same time does not represent the general feeling of freethinkers even as to methods of propaganda.'[105] This is not to say that he gave up in any way on the freethought cause. On the contrary: 'The cause of Freethought is indestructible; it must go on gaining ground even if secularism be mismanaged. It has the best fighting case in the world; and every competent Freethinker has as much advantage over an orthodox opponent as an ironclad has over a Chinese junk.'[106] Thus the Hall of Science dispute with Foote put an end to Robertson's active involvement in the society which had dominated his life for nearly ten years. The Bradlaugh Memorial Hall Company was eventually wound up in 1897, having achieved next to nothing.[107]

Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner would always be extremely grateful for Robertson's unflinching support in the difficult days after her father's death. Not only did he stand by her in the Hall of Science dispute, he also came down from Edinburgh, where he was again working on the staff of the *Scottish Leader*, to take over the editorship of the *National Reformer*, a burden then on Hypatia's hands.[108] The *National Reformer* was no longer the official party organ; in 1890, the N.S.S. news had been transferred to its chief rival, G.W. Foote's *Freethinker*, which favoured a more populist, less scholarly approach. With Robertson as editor, the *National Reformer* knew a brief revival, but soon the circulation stagnated and continuation was no longer feasible. On 1 October 1893, Robertson closed down what had once been Bradlaugh's and the secularists' flagship, and decided to follow it up with his own monthly *Free Review*, which, with its higher price of 1*s*, was aimed at a more select market.[109] In the first issue, the editor stated his intentions: 'It is primarily an attempt to make a platform for opinions which are more or less unlikely to get a

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[105] J.M. Robertson, 'The Position of the National Secular Society', *National Reformer* (4 June 1893), p. 363.

[106] *Ibid.*, p. 364.

[107] David Tribe, *100 Years of Freethought* (London, 1967), p. 42.

[108] Bradlaugh Bonner, 'John Mackinnon Robertson: a Tribute', p. 112.

[109] J.M. Robertson, 'Concerning "The Free Review"', *National Reformer* (10 September 1893), p. 170.

hearing in even the more advanced of the established reviews, with perhaps the exception of the *Westminster*.'[110] The *Free Review* ran under Robertson's editorship until September 1895, when it was taken over by Dr Rowland de Villiers, who from 1897 to 1900 continued it as *The University Magazine and Free Review*, to which Robertson continued to contribute. As we will see, Robertson's involvement with Villiers would have some unexpected repercussions.

In the year he started the *Free Review*, Robertson married the American Maude Mosher, daughter of Charles Mosher, of Des Moines, Iowa.[111] We do not know much about her, nor about Robertson's married life in general, but Sidney Gimson reported it on it as apparently quite happy.[112] They had a son, Guy, and a daughter, Guenn. After his marriage, Robertson left his lodgings in Broadhurst Gardens, and moved with his wife to a house in Oakley Crescent, Chelsea. In 1896, they moved to Lansdowne Gardens, South Lambeth, and around 1900, to Baker Street. Before they settled down in their house in Pembroke Gardens around 1920, there were at least two other moves: to Westerham in Kent around 1906, and to Pembury, also in Kent, some years later.[113]

Part of the motivation for moving so frequently may have been Robertson's need for more space to house his rapidly expanding library. He was an incurable book buyer, and even when his financial means would hardly allow it, he kept adding to his library. On one particular occasion, his friend John A. Hobson found him stealing into his room 'with an armful of books which he was seeking to conceal from the landlady who had expressed her alarm lest the weight of the library should break down the ceiling of his room.'[114] At his death, Robertson left a collection of over 20,000 volumes, and his entire output as a writer bears testimony to the fact that he must have read more of these than would seem possible to most ordinary mortals. Books were Robertson's main tools, and his library was that of a reader, not a collector.

As far as his career as a writer is concerned, Robertson was now producing the 'magnumopuses' he had looked forward to in his letter to Patrick Geddes. In fact, between the years 1891 and 1906, Robertson wrote several monumental works, such as his *Short History of Christianity*, *Short History of Freethought*,

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[110] J.M. Robertson, 'Concerning Magazines In General and This One In Particular', *Free Review* (October 1893), p. 2.

[111] *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Gordon Stein (New York, 1985), p. 559.

[112] Gimson, 'Honouring the Rt. Hon. J.M. Robertson On the Seventieth Anniversary of his Birth', p. 21.

[113] This is indicated by Robertson's letters to various correspondents,

[114] Appreciation of Robertson by John A. Hobson, prefixed to Robertson's *History of Freethought . . . to the Period of the French Revolution*, pp. xxvii–xxviii.

Introduction to English Politics, and *Courses of Study*, each of which separately would have served any lesser scholar as a lifetime's work. In addition, Robertson never ceased to contribute to a plethora of periodicals, and he continued his missionary activities as a lecturer around the country. It comes as no surprise that this man worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, as his friend Sidney Gimson recalled.[115] When his wife was delivered of his son Guy in November 1896, he reported to his friend Dobell that both were doing well, adding somewhat insensitively that he was now prevented from going to the British Museum.[116] Although Robertson's views often clashed with the typical Victorian system of values, he clearly did subscribe wholeheartedly to the Victorian gospel of work.

After Bradlaugh's death, Robertson started on a long struggle to become his successor in parliament.[117] As Bradlaugh's loyal follower and colleague, he seemed an obvious choice for Bradlaugh's old seat in Northampton. However, at the 1892 elections, Robertson was rejected as an official Liberal Party candidate, due to rather dubious manipulations within the party. The same thing happened at the elections three years later, when a trade union candidate was given preference over him. This time, he decided to stand as an Independent Radical Candidate, received quite a considerable number of votes (1,131), but was not elected. His election programme had comprised eleven remarkably progressive points, among which were such controversial issues as: old age pension, decrease of armaments, the vote for women, Home Rule for Ireland, and free education for higher schools and universities.[118] A Bradlaughite candidate eventually secured the Northampton seat in 1900,[119] but Robertson had to wait until the 1906 Liberal landslide before he won his seat, not for Northampton, but for the heavily industrial Tyneside division.

In view of all this fervent journalistic and political activity, it is surprising that Robertson still found the time to travel. In November 1895 we find him in

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[115] Gimson, 'Honouring the Rt. Hon. J.M. Robertson On the Seventieth Anniversary of his Birth', p. 21.

[116] Robertson to Dobell, 4 November 1896.

[117] The fullest description of Robertson's political career can be found in Conrad Joseph Kaczkowski's *John Mackinnon Robertson: Freethinker and Radical*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2 vols (St. Louis University, 1964); a more concise account is Jim Herrick's 'J.M. Robertson: The Politician' in *J.M. Robertson (1856–1933): Liberal, Rationalist, and Scholar*, ed. G.A. Wells (London, 1987), p. 31–57. Unless otherwise stated, the latter is used as the source for the information given here regarding Robertson and politics.

[118] Robertson's election programme is in the Dobell papers in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[119] Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, p. 297.

Paris, where he staid at 235 Faubourg St. Honoré for six months.[120] Two years later, on October 14, 1897, he embarked on an extensive lecture tour in the United States.[121] For the next few months, his address was 7 Ware Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The tour was apparently quite successful, and took him around the principal universities. It seems likely that he had contact with important American freethinkers, and he may have sought out their renowned leader, Robert G. Ingersoll, who was Bradlaugh's match as an inspirational platform propagandist. Robertson was apparently none too impressed by the standard of American freethought. He attended an Ethical Culture service which was 'remarkably well–attended', but otherwise 'a factitious display, wrought of literary and philosophic commonplaces, carefully draped and carefully posed, but inherently trite, jejune, and distant alike from opinion and from action'. When he went to church on the following Sunday, he found to his surprise that 'the preacher was, of all the clergymen I have known or heard, one of the most palpably genuine, the most manly, the most compulsively sincere.'[122] Coming from Robertson, this is rare praise indeed, and it shows that, in spite of his undeniable dogmatism, he was still capable of appreciating in his religious enemies the qualities he regarded so highly himself.

When Robertson was back in Europe again in the spring of 1898,[123] he took a well–earned holiday in Brittany, but did not allow himself to stop working. Having finally returned to London in September, he thanked his bookseller Bertram Dobell for a note, which 'followed me to Brittany on my holiday; and having, as usual, work to do every other day there, I finished correspondence as much as possible.'[124] However, the strain was beginning to tell even on Robertson. In December he complained of having been 'heavily overworked for some time back'.[125] There are, however, no indications that he slowed down the pace at which he worked.

One of the reasons why Robertson crossed the Atlantic may have been financial. The three visits Bradlaugh had paid to the United States had been attempts to restore his precarious financial position, and the American lecture circuit appeared to be relatively lucrative.[126] Whether Robertson's attempt was a financial success is not clear, but that money was becoming more and more of

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[120] Robertson to Dobell, 13 November 1895; J.M. Robertson, 'Sociological Notes', *Reformer* (15 January 1900), p. 45.

[121] *Labour Annual* (London, 1898), p. 204.

[122] J.M. Robertson, 'About Sentimentalism', *Reformer* (15 April 1898), p. 32.

[123] Robertson left the United States on 19 April 1898. *Reformer* (15 April 1898), p. 15.

[124] Robertson to Dobell, 6 September 1898.

[125] Robertson to Volkhovsky, 15 December 1898. The Houghton Library, Harvard University, has three letters from Robertson to Feliks V. Volkhovsky: bMS Kilgour Russ 51, f. 337.

[126] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 80.

a problem to him is evident from his correspondence. His 1895 election campaign had him writing to Dobell for a possible loan,[127] and a year later he admitted: 'As for my finances, I must own that I have borrowed more than I have earned lately.'[128] He unfolded the following money–making plan to Dobell:

> Months ago, apprehending money pressure, I began to work out an old scheme of mine for a sensational story, to be entitled 'Treasure England', and to deal with search for buried treasure *in* England, as a variation on the customary resort to the Spanish Main and pirate Islands. It is not at all an ideal literary undertaking: my main aim is to make some money to pay my debts.

Robertson wrote three chapters, which, perhaps fortunately so, have not survived.[129] Money remained a problem, but it did not worry him overmuch. In his *Short History of Freethought* he remarked that 'nearly every freethinking writer is advised by prudent friends to give up such unprofitable work',[130] but that was not a kind of prudence Robertson admired. The following autobiographical sketch summarizes his attitude in matters financial:

> My wife will remember how in the old days, when, at times, owing to the failure of some payment (that was one of the experiences in those days of the penman), it seemed distinctly doubtful whether I could pay the next quarter's rent . . . I had always an unbreakable rule, and that was when things were looking thoroughly bad to go out to a restaurant and have a good dinner and a bottle of wine. . . . That seemed to be the time that you needed it.[131]

Here, for once, we catch a pleasant glimpse of this stern rationalist's more whimsical side, which he doubtlessly possessed but, as he grew older, was less and less inclined to reveal.

The year 1900 took Robertson further away from England than he had ever been: South Africa. He left on the 'Briton' on June 2nd, while the 'Dunvegan Castle' saw him safely back in England by mid–December.[132] Robertson was commissioned by the pro–Boer *Morning Leader* 'to report on the working of

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[127] Robertson to Dobell, 27 June 1895.

[128] Robertson to Dobell, 16 September 1896.

[129] Robertson to Dobell, 9 February 1896.

[130] *A Short History of Freethought*, p. 418.

[131] Robertson, 'Speech on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday', p. 23.

[132] 'Jottings', *Reformer* (15 June 1900), p. 321; 'Jottings', *Reformer* (15 December 1900), p. 689.

martial law in that country'. The letters he wrote from Cape Colony and Natal under the pseudonym of Scrutator were later revised and published as a book, *Wrecking the Empire*. It was his unpopular opinion that 'the policy of crushing the two Dutch Republics in South Africa is on the one hand preparing the dismemberment of the British Empire by creating an irreconcilable hatred of us among the South African Dutch, who are bound greatly to outnumber the British when the Johannesburg gold mines are exhausted, if not sooner; and, on the other hand, is degrading the moral code of the British majority alike in the colonies and the mother country.'[133] The extent of Robertson's notoriety as a pro–Boer is illustrated by the account of his friend Alfred Cox:

> He [Robertson] was a 'pro–Boer' and on more than one occasion was assaulted at meetings. I remember one night when there had been a pro–Boer meeting in Newcastle at which one of the speakers was Dr. Spence Watson, a Quaker, and a distinguished member of the Liberal Party. Some Gateshead 'patriots' resolved to make things hot for him. He lived within a stone's throw of my house and we heard the tramp of the crowd . . . , as it proceeded to the Spence Watson house and demanded that he should come outside. When he declined they broke several of his windows and would have done worse if the police had not intervened. I'm glad they did not know that Robertson, a still more notorious pro–Boer, was at that time staying with me.[134]

However, Robertson was not one to shirk unpopular causes. He was fiercely opposed to jingoism and imperialism, and never afraid to speak out openly against these, in writing or on the platform. The parliamentary career on which he was about to embark did nothing to change this, as we will see.

The beginning of this century still saw Robertson wavering between two very different 'career options'. He wrote to Dobell: 'As to Parliament vs authorship, my instincts are all for the latter; but the point of *influence* has to be considered. Which way can I best get a hearing?'[135] Eventually, Robertson decided in favour of Parliament, although throughout his parliamentary career he continued to write at a more than respectable pace. His political position at this time can be described as 'new Liberal'. In 1899, Robertson had joined a remarkable and influential discussion group, the Rainbow Circle. The group was formed in 1893 'to include progressives of all shades of opinion'. Its aim was 'to provide a rational and comprehensive view of political and social progress, leading up to a consistent body of political and economic doctrine,

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[133] *Wrecking the Empire* (London, 1901), p. v.

[134] Alfred Cox, *Among the Doctors* (London, 1950), pp. 65–6.

[135] Robertson to Dobell, 27 November 1903.

which could be ultimately formulated in a programme of action . . . for social reformers.'[136] Among its other members were well-known names like Herbert Samuel, Ramsay MacDonald, and John A. Hobson, a close friend of Robertson's. In 1896, the Circle founded its own journal, the *Progressive Review*, and according to Hobson, this event marked the origins of the 'New Liberalism' of which Robertson was to become an important exponent.[137] The immediate intention of the 'New Liberals' was to unify the 'multiplicity of progressive movements', to come to grips with 'that huge unformed monster', the social question, and to implement 'a specific policy of reconstruction' based on a new conception of 'economic freedom . . . the conscious organisation of the functions of the state.'[138] The historian Michael Freeden sees as their main achievement that they did not 'theorize in a vacuum' but attempted to combine 'the major intellectual tendencies of the time, to form a powerful framework within which to tackle those concrete issues' such as 'dire poverty, unemployment, and disease'.[139]

Within the context of the Rainbow Circle and the 'New Liberalism', there was an important role for the Ethical Societies, which 'served as a fusion point of liberal, Idealist, evolutionary, and moderate Socialist thought, and redirected the traditional liberal concern with morals and justice.'[140] As in secularism, lecturing was an essential activity for the Ethical Movement. In 1900, Robertson, together with Hobson and the Socialist Herbert Burrows, became an appointed lecturer for the South Place Ethical Society, a particularly active centre of radical intellectual thinking.[141] He delivered his last lecture at South Place shortly before his death, while he remained a member of the Rainbow Circle until 1931.[142]

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[136] Preface to *The Rainbow Circle, papers 1910–1911, Second Chambers in Practice*; quoted in H.V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals, and Social Politics 1892–1914* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 105.

[137] Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, p. 51.

[138] *Progressive Review*, 1 (1896); quoted by Emy, *Liberals, Radicals, and Social Politics 1892–1914*, pp. 105–6.

[139] Michael Freeden, *The New Liberalism. An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford, 1978), p. 4.

[140] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[141] I.D. Mackillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 60. Because of Hobson's and Robertson's involvement in the Boer-war, and because Burrows was ill for some time, they could not actually start work until 1903.

[142] Freeden, *Minutes of the Rainbow Circle 1894–1924*, p. 365.

The Robertson Libel Case[143]

Having decided in favour of a political career, Robertson went on a lecture tour that took him around the northern counties in 1901 and 1902. The tour was a success, and in October 1902 he was invited by the Executive Committee of the Liberal Party to become the Liberal candidate for the Tyneside Division of Northumberland. In December he delivered a speech before the Committee, and the following January another one, and he was subsequently adopted as the Liberal candidate. Robertson's fervent lecturing had made him well-known to the Tynesiders, and he had every reason to be optimistic about his prospects. However, the year 1903 would be marked for him by an awkward incident that nearly posed a serious threat to his political ambitions: the Robertson libel case.

On 2 November 1903 Robertson brought a libel suit against the *Leeds and Yorkshire Mercury*, a professedly Liberal newspaper of long standing. He had decided to resort to this drastic measure after the paper had published the following offending paragraph on 4 February 1903, under the heading 'A Few Facts for Tynesiders':

> The only explanations which can be found here for the selection of Mr. J.M. Robertson as Liberal candidate for Tyneside are either that those responsible were ignorant of his past achievements in the political and 'literary' world, or that they belonged to that pitiful section which, rather than see the triumph of the vast majority, is ready to wreck the whole party. I have already said that Mr. Robertson is a rabid Little Englander; but this appears to be among the least of the peculiarities which render him an absolutely undesirable candidate. In pamphlets issued by the Freethought Publishing Society, and in a magazine of which he was the first editor, he has dealt with matters unmentionable in polite society. Of the character of this magazine it is sufficient to say that it described itself as 'the only periodical in England which allows free discussion of unconventional and tabooed subjects,' and that it disappeared in 1898, after a police raid – followed by a prosecution – on the publications of the firm by which it was put out. In the last number the editor referred to this publication as 'the courageous experiment initiated by Mr. J.M. Robertson and Mr. Charles Bradlaugh.' It will be interesting to observe whether the Tynesiders will tamely submit to having this gentleman foisted upon them as the only alternative to a Tory.

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[143] Unless otherwise stated, the information in this section is taken from the reports on the Robertson libel case which appeared in the *Daily News*, *Leeds and Yorkshire Mercury*, *Morning Leader*, and *Times* of 3 November 1903.

The case was tried before Justice Grantham and a special jury at the King's Bench Division; the defendants were Messrs. Baines & Co., the proprietors of the *Leeds and Yorkshire Mercury*, and C.M. Annesley, the publisher.

The above paragraph from the *Leeds Mercury* was certainly well–calculated to arouse Robertson's ire. It was not so much the reference to him as a 'rabid Little Englander' which he found offensive, as the way the *Mercury* journalist insinuated that he had been involved in somehow obscene and indeed criminal proceedings. Robertson felt that he owed it to his political supporters as well as to himself to undertake action against what he considered a libellous piece of journalism. He must have been well aware that he was taking a considerable risk, if only financially, but his stern sense of morality did not allow him to remain passive.

The *Mercury* journalist was, in fact, referring obliquely to the widely publicized Bedborough trial, which had given rise to much collective indignation among freethinkers in the course of 1898.[144] George Bedborough was then the twenty–seven year old editor of *The Adult*, the official organ of the Legitimation League, a little London society whose aim was the legalizing of illegitimate children. In the *Adult*, Bedborough defiantly advocated the more progressive causes of the day, such as free love and divorce by mutual consent. Flying thus in the face of established morality, Bedborough and the Legitimation League attracted a keen interest on the part of the police, which was increased by the fact that the meetings of the League were attended by large numbers of anarchists. When the police were alerted that Bedborough sold copies of Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, Part I of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, from the front room of his home in John Street, they decided it was time for action. Bedborough was arrested, the premises were raided, and a number of books and periodicals were seized. These did not only include copies of the *Adult* and Ellis's book, but also of the *Free Review*, the *University Magazine and Free Review*, and of Robertson's *The Saxon and the Celt* and *Montaigne and Shakspere*, hardly books to bring a blush to any young maiden's cheek.

Nonetheless, Robertson's name was thereby linked in the eyes of the public with Bedborough's, whom he did not even know until he read of his case in the papers, as he testified in court. He did, however, join the colourful company that rallied to Bedborough's defence in the Free Press Defence Committee, an initiative taken by an anarchist friend of Bedborough's, Henry Seymour. Apart from Robertson, members included George Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris,

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[144] For an account of the Bedborough trial, see Phyllis Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis: A Biography* (New York, 1980), pp. 190–204. See also Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, pp. 276–7.

George Moore, Edward Carpenter, and several other illustrious figures. The Committee announced that it was 'formed in order to resist this police attack upon liberty. Its members belong to many different schools of opinion. They are not in any way connected with the particular views entertained by Mr. Bedborough, or set forth in the writings which form the ground of the prosecution. The present is neither the time nor the occasion to express either agreement or dissent. The one thing to be done is to defend the liberty of all opinions.' The *Reformer* reported that on 5 September 1898, Robertson presided over the third public meeting of the Committee at St Martin's Town Hall, and 'opened with a vigorous speech in which the attack was soundly characterised.'[145] Apart from that, he does not seem to have been very actively involved.

However, there was one further connection between Robertson and Bedborough in Robertson's one–time dealings with the publishers of the *Adult* and Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, Dr Rowland de Villiers and George Astor Singer, who operated under the dubious flag of the Watford University Press. In September 1895, Robertson had sold the *Free Review* to Villiers, who made Singer editor. In 1897, the periodical was discontinued, only to be revived as the *University Magazine and Free Review*, this time under the editorship of Villiers himself. A somewhat shady character at best, Villiers continued to put out what was considered 'indecent literature' until 1902, when he was prosecuted and arrested and found himself the centre of a public scandal. In court, Robertson again testified that this had only come to his notice through the papers, and that he had long ceased to have any personal contact with either Villiers or Singer. However, for those who wished to see it, his connection with Bedborough and his publishers was sufficient evidence that Robertson moved in less than respectable circles.

The reports on the 'Robertson libel case' that appeared in the *Daily News*, *Morning Leader*, *Leeds and Yorkshire Mercury*, *Times* and especially the freethought *Reformer*[146] make this painfully clear. In the *Reformer*, Robertson's old friend Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner commented on the animus displayed against him in court, and this does not appear to have been too far from the truth. In the opening statement, Robertson's counsel Rawlinson explained the exact nature of his involvement with De Villiers and Bedborough, showing that there was no factual ground for the *Mercury*'s insinuation that Robertson 'had

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[145] 'The Bedborough Prosecution', *Reformer* (15 September 1898), p. 185.

[146] The *Reformer*, edited by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, devoted a special supplement to the issue for 15 November 1903 to the Robertson case. Apart from the editor's views, there was a contribution by G.H. Perris as well as by Robertson himself, in which he briefly explained how he thought the *Leeds Mercury* of 3 November 1903 had misrepresented his case in various ways. The supplement was also reprinted in pamphlet form.

been party to the writing, editing and publishing of filthy and obscene literature of a character unmentionable in polite society.' Rawlinson asserted that it was this that Robertson objected to, not the criticism of his political views.

Robertson then went into the witness–box to be cross–examined by the defendant's counsel, Sir Edward Clarke. In the examination, the main issue was whether the *Mercury*'s claim that Robertson in his writings had 'dealt with matters unmentionable in polite society' could be substantiated. Clarke questioned Robertson at length about the doctrines of Malthusianism and Neo–Malthusianism which Robertson had advocated with such missionary zeal in the *Free Review* and elsewhere. When asked to define Malthusianism, Robertson stated that 'Malthusianism is commonly understood to mean the doctrine that population tends to multiply faster than the means of subsistence, and therefore some steps to check it are necessary to keep down poverty.' Neo–Malthusianism, Robertson explained, was a modification of this theory, in that 'the only rational check Malthus admitted was postponement of marriage until late in life. The Neo–Malthusianist suggests that it should not be postponed until late in life, but that it should be entered upon at an earlier date, and that prudence should be observed as to the number of the family.'

It is clear that Robertson now found himself on dangerous territory. Birth control, to which Neo–Malthusianism amounted in practice, was a highly sensitive and controversial subject, often seen as bordering on the obscene and certainly not a fit subject to discuss at the dinner table. In his advocacy of birth control, Robertson had followed in the footsteps of his master, Charles Bradlaugh, whose Neo–Malthusian writings and lectures had made less progressive souls shudder in horror over two decades earlier. On this occasion, it seemed that little had changed since then. Extracts from a lecture by Robertson on 'Over–Population', delivered to the Sunday Lecture Society on 27 October 1889, were read out to the jury by Sir Edward Clarke, and Justice Grantham explained emphatically to the jury that 'the whole point was that the writer in the "Leeds and Yorkshire Mercury" said in his judgment a man who lectured on Neo–Malthusianism was not a fit and proper man to be a candidate for Parliament . . . The plaintiff admitted he held those views, or did hold them. Was not a writer justified in saying so?' Further extracts from other articles on the population question were read out, and Robertson was made to repeat several times that he did not think such a matter unfit for polite society. At this point, Justice Grantham intervened and remarked that he 'had been looking at one of the subjects published before the Sunday Lecture Society, which seemed to him to be practically a direct incentive to abortion.' Robertson's indignant objection that he had spoken of abortion as 'injurious' was of no avail.

Proceedings were then swiftly wrapped up. Justice Grantham did not allow Robertson's counsel to present other evidence or to call further witnesses in support of the case. The final word was for Sir Edward Clarke, who claimed

that he had proved the offending article to be 'accurate from beginning to end'. Without much ado, the jury then reached its verdict: they did not feel that the alleged libel exceeded fair comment, and a verdict was returned for the defendants. Robertson's attempt to clear his reputation had backfired and he now had to face the consequences.

Partly, these were of a financial kind. The verdict left Robertson with a very heavy bill of costs to pay, while running an election campaign was already more than he could really afford.[147] Fortunately, he could always depend on his fellow freethinkers to come to his aid. In the *Reformer*, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner asked her readers 'to put their hands in their pockets' for Robertson once more,[148] and there is little doubt that, in time–honoured freethought fashion, this is exactly what they did, taking at least some of the burden off his shoulders.

The political consequences, though, seemed more of a direct threat to Robertson's career. Immediately after the trial, he placed his resignation in the hands of the Executive Committee of the Liberal Party and expressed his wish that a meeting should be called to consider a new candidate. Once again, however, he found that he had not been deserted by his supporters. On November 5th, the Executive Committee of the Tyneside Liberal Association held a fully–attended meeting, at which a resolution was carried that expressed unabated confidence in Robertson as a candidate. A similar resolution had then already been passed by the Women Liberals, who had met earlier.[149] His political future was now no longer in jeopardy, although it was not until the Liberal landslide of the 1906 elections that Robertson could finally enter Parliament.

The Robertson libel case may in itself seem a fairly minor incident, that was not even given much publicity in contemporary newspapers. The significance of the case, however, lies in the way it illuminates Robertson's position in the eyes of what we may conveniently term the establishment, represented here by the defendant's counsel Sir Edward Clarke, and, more particularly, by Justice Grantham. The surviving newspaper reports make it sufficiently clear that to them, Robertson, as Bradlaugh's pupil and ideological successor, appeared as a dangerous threat to the stock middle–class values of decency and propriety. Much more was at stake in this trial than a relatively simple decision about the literal truth or untruth of a certain newspaper passage. The fact that the plaintiff was an outspoken advocate of birth control on Neo–Malthusian principles and a freethinker made sure that it was he, rather than the proprietors of the *Leeds*

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[147] In fact, Robertson had to raise the considerable amount of £700 to cover the costs of his court case. 'Random Jottings', *Literary Guide* (1 January 1904), p. 9.

[148] *Reformer* (15 November 1903), p. 4.

[149] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Mercury, who found himself forced to put up a defence. Justice Grantham's overall attitude and in particular his insinuation that Robertson was a promoter of free abortion shows clearly how squarely he sympathized with the moral indignation which had given rise to the paragraph in the *Leeds Mercury*. Under these circumstances, the fact that the article had done precisely what Robertson accused it of was of little importance. Whereas a man like John Morley, as Robertson's counsel noted, could deal with Neo–Malthusianism without raising any eyebrows, Robertson's ideological stance was too far left of the centre to become generally accepted as at least 'respectable'. That such an incident did little to mellow an already irascible temperament is perhaps not too difficult to understand.

The Parliamentary Years: 1906–1918

The prime issue of the 1906 elections, which were finally going to see Robertson in Parliament, was Free Trade. In 1903, Joseph Chamberlain had started his campaign for Tariff Reform, which proposed protectionist measures favouring the Dominions, and thereby linked the principle of Free Trade, of which Robertson was a staunch and inveterate defender, with Imperialism, which he abhorred. His election campaign for the Tyneside Division of Northumberland was marked by an endless string of lectures and debates on Free Trade. John A. Hobson called him 'the best platform advocate of Free Trade that that controversy has produced in my lifetime', adding that 'it was his desire to do what he could for that cause which kept him in politics – a sphere in which his severely logical mind must often have felt very uneasy.'[150] Robertson conducted his campaign from the house of his friend Alfred Cox at Gateshead. Cox recalled that 'the fight was a hard one, his [Robertson's] opponent being Mr Samuel Storey of Sunderland, who, though a Liberal, had fallen for Protectionism.' Robertson made himself immensely popular with his constituents by persistently going into all the mining villages in the division.[151] His efforts were not wasted: with 4,611 votes he achieved a comfortable majority,[152] and duly entered Parliament.

The outlines of Robertson's parliamentary career are easily sketched. In 1911, Asquith appointed him secretary to the Board of Trade, a position he had to give up when Asquith's Coalition government was formed in May 1915. In that same year he was made a Privy Councillor. One year later, he was elected chairman of the Liberal Publications Department, which he remained until

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[150] John A. Hobson, 'Further Tributes to "J.M.R."', *Literary Guide* (February 1933), p. 37.

[151] Cox, *Among the Doctors*, p. 65.

[152] *Morning Post* (7 January 1933).

1927. He also became Chairman of the Government Committee on Food Prices. At the 1918 'Coupon' election, his loyalty to Herbert Asquith, and his aversion to Lloyd George made him reject the 'coupon' which was offered to all Lloyd George Liberals who were prepared to co–operate with the Conservatives in a Coalition Government. He was therefore not returned to parliament, and this was indeed the end of his parliamentary career.

Parliamentary life weighed heavily on Robertson's shoulders. For one thing, he was under severe financial pressure. When he was asked in 1906 to subscribe to a fund raised for the Liberal politician George Howells, he had to refuse: 'My expenses have so much increased by reason of my parliamentary life that I am distinctly embarrassed; having to earn more, and much less time to earn it.'[153] Financial pressure combined with an ever–increasing workload could induce even Robertson to an irritated outburst: 'My standing difficulty is that I have all the time to earn my living, and the hundred and nineteen good causes are each one singly enough to occupy one's time!'[154] The truth seems to be that Robertson did not really have the makings of a successful politician, as Hobson confirms:

> Though later in the early twentieth century he was drawn into active participation in the Free Trade controversy, was elected into Parliament and even held office as Undersecretary in the Board of Trade, his heart never lay in politics. He could never become a sound party man, for, though certain early excesses of the Rising Labour movement repelled him and drove him into the Liberal camp, he was never quite at ease there and was, I think, glad to return to his books and his controversial theories.[155]

Labour politician Philip Snowden considered Robertson's appointment as Secretary to the Board of Trade his 'undoing as a Parliamentary debater', since, in his opinion, 'he was never meant to be the mere spokesman of a Government Department.'[156]

Snowden was right, of course. Robertson was a controversialist to the core, who, as he grew older, found it increasingly difficult to appreciate that not everyone had his mental powers; moreover, he never wavered from his own conception of truth. These qualities did not equip him for a smoothly successful political career, but they did make him one of the best and most feared debaters

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[153] Robertson to Applegarth, 11 July 1906. This letter is in the Howells papers, Bishopsgate Library, London.

[154] Robertson to Mrs H.F. Dryhurst, 6 June 1910. British Library MS 46473, f. 15.

[155] Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, pp. 49–50.

[156] Philip Viscount Snowden, *An Autobiography*, 2 vols (London, 1934), I, p. 313.

in the house, as Snowden recalled: 'I consider the two best debaters I have known in the House of Commons to be Mr J.M. Robertson and Mr Ellis Griffith. . . . In the House of Commons he [Robertson] would tear an opponent's case to shreds with remorseless logic.'[157] Robertson's logic-chopping did not particularly endear him to his opponents. Balfour observed sourly that 'he does not make the House generally more sympathetic with his arguments when he thinks that everybody who disagrees with him is either an ignoramus or a fool.'[158]

Robertson's asperity in dealing with political affairs was partly the result of the undeniable fact that his heart really lay elsewhere: in literature. Although he still wrote more in these years than most writers manage in a lifetime, by his own standards his pace slackened, simply because he had less time to spare. His publications were now more geared to his political activities, and he wrote numerous pamphlets on various controversial political issues, notably Free Trade and Tariff Reform. It was not until after 1918 that Robertson could devote himself more fully to his literary studies.

For many years during his political career, Robertson was actively involved in the Rationalist Peace Society, founded in 1910, with Robertson's old friend Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner as chairman and Robertson as president.[159] In Hypatia's biography, the society's founding principles were summarized as follows: 'Its special objects were to promote international peace by the advocacy of international arbitration, to oppose militarism in all its forms, and to promote friendly understanding between the various nations. Emphasis was laid upon the desire to co-operate with other peace organisations on every possible occasion.'[160] The Society was partly intended to provide the peace movement with a rationalist outlet, where it was previously dominated by Christians. Although its goals were set high, its achievements were finally limited: 'Beyond passing a resolution opposing compulsory military training in schools, and standing out against any form of conscription, there was little the Peace Society could do.'[161] In 1921, the Society was dismantled.[162]

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[157] *Ibid.*, pp. 312–13.

[158] Quoted in Herrick, 'J.M. Robertson: The Politician', p. 40.

[159] The papers of the Rationalist Peace Society are in the N.S.S. archive at the Bishopsgate Library, London.

[160] A. Bonner and C. Bradlaugh Bonner, *Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner. The Story of her Life* (London, 1942), p. 91.

[161] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 213.

[162] Bonner and Bonner, *Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner*, p. 97.

The Final Years: 1918–1933

After Robertson's defeat in the 1918 election, he remained active in the Liberal party. He kept his position as chairman of the Liberal Publications Department until 1927. He was President of the National Liberal Federation in 1920 and from 1921 to 1923. He continued his busy practice as a public lecturer, and he was active in the International Arbitration League and the Malthusian League (he had been a member of the latter for many decades). In spite of his continuing political activity, he was happy not to be an M.P. any more, as his correspondence indicates.[163]

A seemingly endless stream of publications now poured from his pen, adding several new 'magnumopuses' to his already more than impressive list. It was Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner's opinion that 'perhaps the subject most dear to John M. Robertson's heart throughout his life has been his study of Shakespeare.'[164] Robertson now found more time to devote himself to his old love, and he turned his critical attention to the question of the real authorship of Shakespeare's plays. As Chapter 4 of this study will show, he was as keen a controversialist in matters Shakespearean as he was in politics and religion, conducting an extensive correspondence with many major Shakespeare scholars of his day, like John Dover Wilson and Edmund Chambers. Always ready to storm the barricades, he regarded himself as 'having to fight singlehanded against the banded academics'.[165] Robertson's 'disintegrating' views on Shakespeare made him widely known as a Shakespearean scholar, but although he did confess that he was perhaps growing 'unduly impatient of academics',[166] his increasing asperity and lack of tolerance towards those members of the academic establishment who could not share his views also brought him much notoriety. As a Shakespeare scholar, Robertson always remained an outsider. One might argue that this was perhaps the perspective he was most comfortable with, but in the last decade of Robertson's life a tone of bitterness and vindictiveness tends to creep into his writings which shows that the lack of recognition he experienced as a Shakespeare scholar left him far from untouched.

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[163] Robertson ends a letter to A.W. Pollard (National Library of Scotland), dated 24 January 1919, with the words: 'Please, I am no longer "M.P.", thank the Fates!'. A letter to T.S. Eliot (Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am, ff. 123–124), dated 3 September 1922, has: 'I ceased to be "M.P." (thank God!) at the end of 1918.'

[164] Bradlaugh Bonner, 'John Mackinnon Robertson: A Tribute', p. 112.

[165] Robertson to Dover Wilson, 21 June 1929. There are eight letters from Robertson to John Dover Wilson in the Dover Wilson papers in the National Library of Scotland, MS 14330, ff. 7–8, 62, 64, 99, 116–18, 128, 187–8.

[166] Robertson to Lummis, 25 March 1928. There are three letters to E.W. Lummis in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, fMS Eng 256.50, ff. 10–12.

However, Robertson could always count on the general respect of his fellow freethinkers. In 1926, Charles A. Watts, Vice–Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Rationalist Press Association (which had published so many of Robertson's books), took the initiative to open a Seventieth Birthday Testimonial Fund. Nearly a thousand pounds were raised, and offered to Robertson at the Trocadero Restaurant, Piccadilly, on November 14, 1926. The gathering was chaired by Graham Wallas, and among the guests and speakers were many well–known secularists, rationalists, and Liberal politicians. Robertson's speech at this occasion is in fact the only autobiographical account of any length he left to posterity, and his statement on his own work is particularly interesting:

> I should say . . . that I have always been doing the same thing. Whether it was in mythology, or sociology, or hierology, or politics, or history, or ethics, or economics, I always felt myself to be just finding things out, trying to find the truth about something, wanting to know what really happened in the particular case, and how did the thing go; or, in matters of dispute with regard to aesthetic criticism, what is the right judgment, what constitutes the right judgment, what are the principles of right criticism. One of my volumes has been entitled *Explorations*. I sometimes think that that should be the title of all of them – *Explorations in Seventy Volumes*; and, whatever I may have found out, at all events I have had a very good time in the journey.[167]

In the same speech, Robertson made known his intention to rewrite 'properly' his *History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century*. Together with the *History of Freethought . . . to the Period of the French Revolution*, this was perhaps his most widely acclaimed scholarly work.

In a letter to a friend dated 26 July 1930, Robertson explains that he had not been able to reply more promptly because of 'a rather crushing pressure of unexpected work'. He never allowed himself to work less as he grew older. In fact, he observed that 'the older I grow, the more things I seem to have to attend to',[168] and Robertson was never one to neglect his manifold duties. He kept revising and expanding his older works, and in 1932, a year before his death, he had completed a new, revised, and enlarged edition of his massive bibliography *Courses of Study*, which was meant as a guide to reading for those intrepid students who wished to follow in Robertson's footsteps. The editing proved very burdensome, even by Robertson's standards, and this may have

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[167] Robertson, 'Speech on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday', p. 23.

[168] Robertson to Lummis, 26 July 1930.

contributed to bringing about the slight stroke he had on September 1, which was accompanied by partial aphasia and some loss of mental capacity. It was only with the greatest difficulty that his doctor could persuade him to take complete rest, but in the end he obeyed, and he recovered sufficiently to be able to lecture at the South Place Ethical Society on October 16. Although he was obviously not entirely well, 'his delivery was characteristically vigorous', as J.P. Gilmour recalled. By December, he was still full of plans for large-scale literary enterprises: 'Besides books ready in my desk, a small one in the press, and one partly done (which hopes to be my best on Shakespeare), I am getting on steadily with one on *Thirty Years of Egypt*, for next autumn, and then perhaps some.'[169]

Robertson would not live to see his next autumn, and the book on Egypt would never be completed. It is significant that the greater part of Robertson's last literary efforts should be spent on Egyptian affairs. Throughout his parliamentary career, Robertson had been a tireless advocate of Egyptian self-government, sharply condemning Lord Cromer's governorship of the country, which he felt 'was more directed to the development of English interests in Egypt than to any progressive preparing of the people for any species, for even the simplest form, or the beginnings of self-government.'[170] Sir Eldon Gorst, Cromer's successor, did find favour with Robertson for being 'the instrument of carrying into effect the only display of really progressive policy that we have made in Egypt for a number of years.'[171] In Robertson's view, England's continuing presence in Egypt could only be justified if the English made a concentrated effort to prepare Egypt for self-government. However, at the outbreak of the First World War, Egypt was officially declared a British protectorate and its reigning monarch Abbas Hilmi II was deposed while abroad. It was not until 1922 that the protectorate was ended and the Kingdom of Egypt was founded, although the British had far from withdrawn.

In the last ten years of his life, Robertson's interest in Egypt seems to have intensified. He conducted an extensive correspondence with the exiled Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, whom he considered Egypt's rightful leader. The Khedive was a man of considerable intellectual accomplishments, who had received his education in Vienna in the 1880s and 1890s, and had a perfect command of German, French and English.[172] Robertson took great pains to bring the Khedive's case to the notice of influential political figures like the former

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[169] Quoted from J.A. Hammerton, 'Further Tributes to "J.M.R."', *Literary Guide* (February 1933), p. 38.

[170] *Hansard* (27 July 1911).

[171] *Ibid.*

[172] Jacques Berque, *Egypt. Imperialism and Revolution*, trans. Jean Stewart (London, 1972), p. 164.

Foreign Secretary Lord Grey, while in the mean time keeping Abbas scrupulously informed of the latest political developments. He edited and wrote an introduction to A.H. Beaman's sympathetic *The Dethronement of the Khedive*,[173] and assisted in the editing and publishing of Abbas's own *A Few Words on the Anglo–Egyptian Settlement*.[174]

Abbas Hilmi II showed himself grateful for the propagandistic work Robertson performed on his behalf. He invited Robertson and his wife to stay with him on the Riviera, but Robertson declined on account of having too much work to do. He was, in fact, growing aware that he might not have the time left to finish his literary and critical mission: 'And, now that I am over 73, I want to clear off as diligently as I can some of the historical and critical tasks that I have set myself, which do not seem likely to be done as I think they should be by anyone else.'[175] There may be a touch of Robertsonian arrogance in such a remark, but it also shows how much he considered his work a moral duty to the world, to be fulfilled with complete self–denial when necessary. He wrote in answer to the Khedive's invitation that 'it will be one of my great comforts if I live to see *your* wrongs redressed'[176] and there is a good deal more in this remark than mere politeness.

Robertson would not have long to live. On 5 January 1933, he had lunch with William Jenkins, one of his dearest friends, with whom, long ago, he had been to school in Stirling.[177] In the evening he and his wife listened to a wireless talk on Saving, a subject to which he had devoted many an article and several books. A few hours later he had a second, fatal stroke, and died instantaneously. Two days later he was cremated at Golders Green, without ceremony of any kind, and with no more than thirty mourners present. They included Robertson's son Guy, representatives of the Rationalist Press Association, the N.S.S., the Ethical Union, and the South Place Ethical Society, as well as his old friend Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, who was to die soon afterwards. Robertson's only daughter Guenn was absent; she had been living in the Unites States since her marriage to an American Mr Farrington.[178]

Robertson's house in Pembroke Gardens, Kensington was filled to overflowing with a library of over 20,000 volumes, which included a unique

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[173] A.H. Beaman, *The Dethronement of the Khedive* (London, 1929).

[174] Abbas Hilmi, *A Few Words on the Anglo–Egyptian Settlement* (London, 1930).

[175] Robertson to Abbas Hilmi II, 24 January 1930. The correspondence between Robertson and Abbas Hilmi II is in the Durham University Library, Abbas Hilmi II papers, file 285, ff. 1–79. Among these papers there are also three letters to the Khedive from Robertson's daughter Guenn (ff. 59–68, 72–74), and one each from his son Guy (ff. 70–71) and from his wife Maude (f. 69).

[176] *Ibid.*

[177] 'Random Jottings', *Literary Guide* (February 1933), p. 40.

[178] Gilmour, '"J.M.R." A Personal Appreciation', p. 35.

collection of works on freethought. He had wished to leave this collection to the Rationalist Press Association, which did not, however, have the space on its premises to house it. Besides, a note in the *Literary Guide* states rather ominously that 'he was not in a position which would justify him in bequeathing it to the organization.'[179] This seems to hint at the dire state of Robertson's finances, and although we do not know this for certain, Robertson may well have been in debt when he died. A few of the rarer books were bought by the R.P.A., but the remainder was put up for auction with Hodgson & Co., on April 26th, 27th, and 28th. The sale was reported by the *Literary Guide* as 'a very successful one': although only two or three books were individually worth more than £5, the total amount raised by the 740 lots was £1,485. Two of Robertson's friends, John Burns and Isaac Foote, were present at the sale.[180]

By the time of the sale, Robertson's wife was no longer alive. According to the obituarist in the *Literary Guide*, she had never recovered from the shock of her husband's sudden and unexpected death. She had a seizure on February 24, and was unconscious to her death five days later. Within forty–eight hours her remains were cremated at Golders Green. The *Literary Guide* obituarist described her as 'an accomplished lady', whose 'attachment to her husband was in every way ideal.' Apparently 'she often accompanied him at R.P.A. functions, where she was a very welcome visitor',[181] and when Robertson's old friend Sidney Gimson tried to 'get him out for dinner and a band at one of the various shows at Earl's Court', Mrs Robertson was always ready to come to his aid.[182] On the whole, one is left with the impression that these attempts cannot have been successful very often, and that Mrs Robertson's part in her husband's life must necessarily have been somewhat limited. Although it is impossible to say whether this marriage was as 'ideal' as Gimson describes it, at least there appears to be no evidence to the contrary.

As far as Robertson's children are concerned, the few glimpses we are afforded of them occur, curiously enough, in relation with Abbas Hilmi II. In the year after her father's death, Guenn Robertson wrote to Abbas, offering to dedicate herself and her fiancé to the Egyptian cause, so as to be able to continue her father's work.[183] Apparently, her marriage to the American

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[179] 'Random Jottings', *Literary Guide* (April 1933), p. 72.

[180] 'Items of Interest', *Literary Guide* (June 1933), p. 110. Copies of the catalogue are in the Amsterdam University Library and among the Abbas Hilmi II papers in the University Library of Durham.

[181] 'Random Jottings', *Literary Guide* (April 1933), p. 72.

[182] Gimson, 'Honouring the Rt. Hon. J.M. Robertson On the Seventieth Anniversary of his Birth', p. 21.

[183] Guenn Robertson to Abbas Hilmi II, March 1933 [?].

Farrington had come to an end, and she and her new fiancé were now in urgent need of work. She speaks of her father in terms of the highest possible respect, and indicates that she had for many years assisted him in his various scholarly investigations. The tone of this and the following letter borders on desperation, and it is in itself an inauspicious sign that Abbas is the only of her father's old friends she can turn to for help. She refers to her brother Guy as having been 'very much affected by the war' and having run through the small patrimony that was hers, leaving her virtually penniless.[184]

Abbas's answer to this plea has unfortunately not been preserved, but in 1939 Guenn again writes to Abbas, this time for an even more compelling reason.[185] She explains how she had returned to London to put her little daughter in the old school she herself had attended as a girl. However, her plan could come to nothing now that certain business prospects had utterly failed her, and left her in a desperate situation, with no one else to turn to. She saw herself forced to ask Abbas for a loan of £100 to enable her to return to America. Again, Abbas's answer has not been recorded, and it is at this crucial point in her life that we lose track of Guenn Robertson entirely. Her correspondence with the exiled Khedive of Egypt indicates poignantly that in his final years Robertson seems to have become an isolated figure, leaving his daughter with few friends to turn to.

After Robertson's death, obituaries appeared in all the major newspapers, and in many minor ones. Although not all the papers were, of course, sympathetic towards Robertson's militant anti–religious views, they agreed that a man of great intellectual stature had passed away. Over forty years after Bradlaugh's death, Robertson was still generally labelled as Bradlaugh's 'disciple' and 'chief helper'. In the leading papers, Robertson's accomplishments as a Shakespearean scholar rather than as a freethinker, rationalist, and Liberal politician were stressed. However, already there were some signs that Robertson's work on Shakespeare was not destined to live on. The *Times* obituarist declared that 'the elaborate structure of his work must be pronounced baseless',[186] and it was not long before this became the generally accepted view. Overall, for a man who lived his life so much in the public eye, Robertson was allowed to sink into oblivion very quickly. It is a significant fact that so few of his books were reprinted after his death.

However, this is not to suggest that his close friends forgot him as easily as the general public. In 1936, an edition of his *History of Freethought . . . to the Period of the French Revolution* was published, to which were prefixed

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[184] Guenn Robertson to Abbas Hilmi II, 29 May 1933.
[185] Guenn Robertson to Abbas Hilmi II, 8 January 1939.
[186] *Times* (7 January 1933).

appreciations of Robertson by his old friends J.P. Gilmour, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Ernest Newman, and John A. Hobson. Among much gratitude for the intellectual stimulus Robertson provided as well as for his steadfast loyalty as a friend, Hobson introduced a critical note:

> I sometimes thought his immense knowledge of the errors of loose thinkers, and of his obligations to expose them, made him too combative, preventing him from developing and applying his creative and constructive gifts which I am certain he possessed, but which never found full scope.[187]

Many who knew Robertson were well and sometimes painfully aware of this combativeness. Shortly after Robertson's death, F. Maddison wrote a letter to Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner in which he observed that their mutual friend 'did not mellow with age.'[188] He had had a heated discussion with Robertson at the National Liberal Club over some economic issue, and they had parted with angry words. In fact, 'mellowness' was never one of Robertson's outstanding qualities. In an obituary in the *Star*, the Socialist politician Manny Shinwell remembered a brush with Robertson thirty years ago:[189]

> A keen individualist, he had been denouncing Socialism, and when I mildly ventured to cross swords with him he referred with contempt to my youthful appearance and my still more youthful arguments.
>
> I retorted by reminding him 'that a man's intelligence was not determined by the length of his whiskers.' Robertson – who wore a beard – seemed to regard this as a personal affront, and was furiously angry. He turned on me and poured forth a torrent of phrases that completely shrivelled me up. I said no more.

When Hobson once tried to confront Robertson with his ferocity in argumentation, Robertson replied: 'You forget that I am only four generations from a painted Pict.'[190] What should perhaps be remembered in the first place was that he was an autodidact of lower–class origins who had to fight all his life to be taken seriously by an establishment generally hostile to his views and background. To Robertson, attack always seemed by far the best defence.

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[187] Appreciation by John A Hobson prefixed to *History of Freethought . . . to the Period of the French Revolution*, p. xxvii.

[188] Letter from F. Maddison to Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, 10 January 1933. Bradlaugh papers, Bishopsgate Library, London.

[189] *Star* (7 January 1933).

[190] Hobson, 'Further Tributes to "J.M.R."', *Literary Guide* (February 1933), p. 37.

Although many who knew him well testified to Robertson's loyalty as a friend, his uncompromising adherence to the principle that the truth (or at least his own version of the truth) should never be disguised sometimes tended to put even the warmest of friendships in jeopardy. When his friends asked him for criticism of their own or their friends' literary work, Robertson made no effort to mince his words. In one case, Bertram Dobell was stung to the quick by Robertson's frank criticism of the poetry of his protégé James Thomson. Robertson's response to Dobell's demand for explanation was characteristically unyielding:

> I don't at all mind your plain expression of your feeling, which I have met with plain answers. It is a question of reason and consistency. If you answer that Thomson had a right to put on airs of supremacy towards Tennyson, but that I am not entitled to criticize him otherwise than deferentially, there is of course nothing more to be said.[191]

In another case, Robertson's young friend Richard Curle was less than pleased when Robertson thus criticised his latest collection of starkly realistic shortstories:

> Certainly these things of yours are better than Arnold Bennett's pot–boilers, which are mere literary crimes; but they are not worth doing in comparison with his real books.
>
> You must forgive my persistent dissent: I can't help it. You can do far sounder and stronger things than these; and I'm not going to encourage you in the blue–and–green light business.[192]

When Curle voiced his displeasure in an angry letter, Robertson responded with a fifteen–page epistle in which he minutely explained what exactly it was he objected to in the younger man's work. The opening lines show sufficiently clearly that Robertson was not inclined to be conciliatory:

> I fancy the heat must have got on your nerves, or you would see that my letter was just in the vein that my talk has always been in with you – the perfectly free speech of a friend. You and I were not wont to be mealy–mouthed in critical talk. That you should call my letter "acrimonious," I confess, startled me. So did your

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[191] Robertson to Dobell, 28 December 1892.

[192] Letter to Curle, 10 July 1912. Robertson's correspondence with Richard Curle, spanning a period of 25 years, is in the Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana, Curle MSS III. See also Chapter 4, Part 2, the section on 'Robertson on Conrad'.

> inference that I regarded your stories as pot–boilers. Surely I expressly said that, though they worried me, I admitted them to be higher things than pot–boilers.[193]

In both cases, the friendship finally survived, but one is left with serious doubts about Robertson's ability to see that 'the perfectly free speech of a friend' is not always the wisest mode of address. In that respect, he must sometimes have been as daunting a figure to his friends as to his enemies.

All in all, what biographical material we have of Robertson resists a convenient summing–up of his life and personality in a few terse lines. On the one hand we have the abrasive public controversialist who is always ready, whether in print or on the platform, to crush his opponents with his reasoning and erudition; the self–made scholar perpetually scorning established authority; the fearless freethinker whose life's mission it was to undermine religion in all its varied manifestations. These are the faces Robertson presented to the outside world and this is how, if at all, he is remembered today. On the other hand there is also Robertson the cook, Robertson the impersonator of bears, Robertson the sentimental soul whose tears flowed at the departure from his beloved Scotland. Those are the rare glimpses we catch of a Robertson with his rationalist guard lowered, in a more relaxed and personal mode. We will not see much of this Robertson in the following pages, but he did exist, and it can do no harm to remind oneself occasionally of the fact.

[193] Letter to Curle, 16 July 1912.

Chapter 2

Robertson and nineteenth–century rationalism

Introduction

It would be impossible to move straight from an account of Robertson's life to a discussion of his literary criticism without paying due attention to his other work, massive in proportion and so rarely consulted now but by a small number of specialists. It was, after all, in a relatively small part of his work that Robertson focused on literary matters *per se*, and a proper understanding and placement of that particular part cannot be achieved without considering the main body of his writings and the system of values which underlies it.

Like many contemporary men of letters, Robertson was not at all convinced of the obviousness of a strict dividing line between 'belles lettres' and other kinds of writing. He believed such a separation to be artificial and 'a matter of convenience rather than of fundamental distinction',[1] although he did admit that in actual practice, there was probably no avoiding it. Nor can it be avoided in the present discussion; however, Robertson's unwillingness to pigeonhole particular fields of literary activity should make us aware of the necessity to look beyond his literary criticism for the origins and fundamentals of his ideas.

In this chapter I therefore intend to provide some appropriate insight into the philosophical and theoretical foundations of Robertson's work, against the background of the intellectual turmoil of his age. An outline of some of the essential currents and developments in nineteenth–century rationalist thought in Britain will set the scene for a discussion of Robertson's particular brand of rationalism. In that discussion, my main concern will not be to provide short outlines of Robertson's separate works, but rather to arrive at a synthesis of certain elementary ideas which are in evidence throughout his writings. Considering the sheer volume of Robertson's output, it is hardly surprising that it is full of echoes and reverberations, many of the origins of which may be traced to the mainstream of Victorian intellectual currents.

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[1] J.M. Robertson, *Elizabethan Literature* (London, 1914), p. 7.

Part 1: British Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century

Introduction

The use of a term such as 'nineteenth–century rationalism' inevitably suggests that one is dealing with a coherent philosophical system or movement, of which the principles as well as the followers may conveniently be listed. However, it is one of the truisms of history that movements are seldom handed down to us in such neat packages, and so it is with the rationalism of the nineteenth century. In fact, we are faced with a plethora of sub–movements and 'isms': materialism, naturalism, determinism, positivism, agnosticism, etc. Each of these would certainly fall under the heading of rationalism, while there are probably as many points of divergence between them as of agreement.

A further, related problem in dealing with Victorian rationalism is that it automatically involves us in a discussion of many of the main currents and developments in Victorian religious and intellectual life. The history of rationalism is the history of evolutionism, the rise of science, Victorian doubt, and many other concepts central to Victorian intellectual history. On these, a whole industry of Victorian researchers and scholars is presently at work, and to give even the briefest overview of their work would be impossible in this place. However, a proper understanding of Robertson's work can only be achieved by viewing him in the light of the rationalist tradition, so an attempt to distil something like the 'rationalist spirit' from Victorian intellectual history is still required.

Terms and Definitions

In his book *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture*, Peter Allan Dale's opening point is that

> the essential intellectual history of the nineteenth century may fairly be described as a search for an adequate replacement for the lost Christian totality, an effort to resurrect a saving belief, as Carlyle poignantly put it, on the ashes of the French revolution.[2]

Although its very 'sweepingness' may render such a statement questionable, Dale does touch upon one of the central issues of the age. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Christian religion was gradually, but dramatically, losing ground. The general story of that process is now a familiar one. The

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[2] Peter Allan Dale, *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture. Science, Art, and Society in the Victorian Age* (Wisconsin, 1989), p. 5.

findings of the geologists, the influence of German biblical criticism, the concept of evolution as developed by Darwin: these three factors are most commonly referred to in short–hand descriptions of the erosion of Christian belief in the Victorian age. Dale's point summarizes the view of many historians that the decline in Christian belief, the downfall of the Christian creed, was counterbalanced by the simultaneous rise of a new creed which seemed to hold infinite promise: the creed of science. Where before Christianity had been the source of human moral and social values, science now took its place as providing the light for man to live by. In the 1870s and 1880s, the trust in science as the bringer of truth reached unprecedented heights, and the scientists and scientific thinkers of the day had become the high priests of the new religion of science.

This 'cult of science' is described with great acumen by Fabian socialist and pioneer sociologist Beatrice Webb (1858–1943) in her autobiography *My Apprenticeship*:

> . . . it is hard to understand the naive belief of the most original and vigorous minds of the 'seventies and 'eighties that it was by science, and by science alone, that all human misery would be ultimately swept away. . . . For who will deny that the men of science were the leading British intellectuals of that period; that it was they who stood out as men of genius with international reputations; that it was they who were the self–confident militants of the period; that it was they who were routing the theologians, confounding the mystics, imposing their theories on philosophers, their inventions on capitalists, and their discoveries on medical men; whilst they were at the same time snubbing the artists, ignoring the poets and even casting doubt on the capacity of the politicians? Nor was the cult of the scientific method confined to intellectuals. 'Halls of Science' were springing up in crowded working–class districts; and Bradlaugh . . . was the most popular demagogue of the day.[3]

For all the bitterness of her post–war perspective, Webb provides a splendid impression of the all–encompassing influence of science in these two decades, Robertson's formative years. Few people were better qualified to paint such a picture than Beatrice Webb. She was, after all, the solace of the great Victorian philosophical system–builder, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), in his sad declining years, and she sat at the feet of such eminent promoters of science as Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895), John Tyndall (1820–1893) and Francis Galton (1822–1911). These men, it was felt, were bringing to the world the

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[3] Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 130–1.

'note of joy, part relief, part excited hope of discovering a new philosophy of man and the universe'[4] that filled the void left by a Christianity in dire straits.

Dale concluded that the philosophical term which would best cover this 'attempt to establish something we may fairly call a religion of science' is *positivism*.[5] He defines positivism more precisely as 'the conviction that science offers the only viable way of thinking correctly about human affairs.'[6] A similar conclusion was reached before by the historian of the philosophy of science, Maurice Mandelbaum. His characterization of positivism involves three points:

> First, positivism rejects metaphysics on the ground that the questions with which metaphysics is concerned presuppose a mistaken belief that we can discover principles of explanation or interpretation which are more ultimate than those which are directly concerned from observation and from generalizations concerning observation.[7]

This sums up the fundamental empiricist position, traceable in the British context to the work of Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century, that any attempt to go beyond the 'phenomena' which we can experience through our senses is a waste of effort. We can never hope to discover any sort of 'underlying reality', however much we might wish such a reality existed. This rejection of metaphysics is apparent, for instance, from the ringing tones in which the rationalist and man of letters George Henry Lewes (1817–1878) introduced his *Biographical History of Philosophy*:

> O reader! let us hear no more of the lofty views claimed as the exclusive privilege of Philosophy. Ignorant indeed must the man be who nowadays is unacquainted with the grandeur and sweep of scientific speculation in Astronomy and Geology, or who has never been thrilled by the revelations of the Telescope and Microscope. The heights and depths of man's nature, the heights to

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[4] Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830–1870* (New Haven and London, 1957), p. 50.

[5] Dale, *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture*, p. 7. This philosophical term should not be confused with Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity, of which Richard Congreve and Frederic Harrison were prominent British adherents. Whenever that system is referred to, it will be spelled with an initial capital: Positivism.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 10. For a full history and critique of positivist thought, see Leszek Kolakowski, *The Alienation of Reason. A History of Positivist Thought* (New York, 1968).

[7] M. Mandelbaum, 'Philosophic Movements in the Nineteenth Century', in *Darwin to Einstein. Historical Studies on Science and Belief*, eds Colin Chant and John Fauvel (London, 1980), pp. 7–8.

> which he aspires, the depths into which he searches, and the grander generalities on Life, Destiny, and the Universe, find as eminent a place in Science as in Philosophy, with the simple difference that they are less vague and are better founded.[8]

However, this type of empiricism is naturally not the exclusive property of nineteenth–century British positivism. As a further distinguishing characteristic, Mandelbaum adds the theory 'that the adequacy of our knowledge increases as it approximates the forms of explanation which have been achieved by the advanced sciences.' In the above quote, Lewes points dramatically to the accomplishments of such 'advanced sciences' as astronomy and geology, and their ability to interpret man and man's place in nature far more effectively than philosophy and, by implication, religion. If we are able to state the laws that govern man and nature with as much certainty as we are able to formulate, for instance, the laws of physics and mathematics, then we will have achieved an adequate degree of knowledge, and that must be our goal. In that way, science comes to be equated with truth, and since there can only be one kind of truth, science leaves no room for metaphysics and religion. This is Mandelbaum's final point:

> . . . a scientific explanation does not involve appeal to any immanent forces nor to any other transcendent entities: to explain a phenomenon is to be able to subsume it under one or more laws of which it is an instance. A law, in its turn, is simply a well–authenticated general descriptive statement of uniformities which have been observed to occur in the past.

In sum, Mandelbaum sees nineteenth–century positivism as involving: 'first, a rejection of metaphysics; second, the contention that science constitutes the ideal form of knowledge; third, a particular interpretation of the nature and the limits of scientific explanation.'

These definitions by Dale and Mandelbaum bring us somewhat closer to some of the fundamentals of the rationalist outlook on life, since rationalism is, to all intents and purposes, emphatically positivist in nature. A further step may be taken by looking in brief at the work of two seminal philosophers of the Victorian age: Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873).

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[8] George Henry Lewes, *The Biographical History of Philosophy*, library ed. (New York, 1859), p. xiv. See Chapter 3 for Lewes's ideas on scientific literary criticism.

Comte and Mill

At first glance, the French philosopher Auguste Comte seems a decidedly unlikely candidate for the position of father of nineteenth-century British rationalism, even apart from his nationality. His desperate love for Clotilde de Vaux and the bizarre system of worship he surrounded her memory with after her death of consumption, all these are well-documented facts that hardly fit the picture of the hard-headed reasoner. But as a rationalist thinker he was immensely influential in British intellectual circles. His *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1830–1842) was promoted to great effect by Mill and George Henry Lewes, and through the latter Comte came to exert a powerful influence on George Eliot (1819–1880). Other important followers included John Morley (1838–1923), who opened the pages of the *Fortnightly Review* to Positivist writers, Frederic Harrison (1831–1923) and Richard Congreve (1818–1899), both of whom remained ardent promoters of the Religion of Humanity until their deaths, when Positivism had long lost the sway it had once held over mid-Victorian intellectual life.[9]

'To study Comte', Basil Willey has said, 'is to find the clue to much that the *Zeitgeist*, in a less systematic way, was doing through other minds in other countries.'[10] To study Comte, therefore, is also to examine some of the essential assumptions of Victorian rationalism. Comte's all-encompassing philosophical system was built on the dogmatic assertion that the application of the scientific method, the method of the natural sciences, to human thought and social life, would lead mankind to discover and unite the truth of its existence. W.M. Simon describes how this assumption was worked out by Comte 'by way of two interlocking and interdependent propositions'. First, Comte formulated the famous Law of the Three Stages:

> The human mind inevitably developed from a first, theological stage in which it explained the world in terms of the will of anthropomorphic gods, by way of a second in which it explained the world in terms of metaphysical abstractions, to a third and final, positive stage in which it explained the world in terms of scientific truth.[11]

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[9] For the impact of Comtism in Britain, see W.M. Simon, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1963), pp. 172–238; Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief. Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850–1960* (London, 1977), pp. 190–9; T.R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity. The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian England* (Cambridge, 1986).

[10] Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies* (London, 1964), p. 198.

[11] Simon, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 4.

But man's knowledge as a whole could not attain to this final, Positive or Scientific stage all at once. Comte saw knowledge as consisting of several disciplines which passed through the three stages one at a time, 'in a definite order, the order of their decreasing generality and increasing interdependence and complexity, namely, mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology.'[12] It was Comte's deepest conviction that in the nineteenth century, this momentous development was now finally reaching its logical conclusion. Biology, he felt, had recently entered the scientific stage, and the same should now be achieved with regard to sociology. The perfecting of sociology, the understanding of man and his place in society, was the ultimate step. It was the philosopher's task to draw sociology into the realm of science, so that Europe as a whole could enter upon its final and perfect stage of development. The necessary tool that needed to be placed into the philosopher's hands so that he could work progress was, of course, the Positivist philosophy. This finally made Comte 'the founder both of the final science and the philosophy based on the complete set of the sciences'.[13]

Comte's *Cours de Philosophie Positive* was obviously far more than an abstract treatise on the sciences and their methods and hierarchy. Its aim was ultimately of a moral and social nature. What Comte wanted to bring about was a total reorganization of society on scientific grounds. Comte's Positivist philosophy and his science of sociology were to give humanity (at least in the western world) its due, and to achieve its final 'redemption and regeneration', where Christianity had failed to do so.[14] Priests were to be replaced by philosophers, who would not serve God or some unknowable metaphysical entity, but humanity only. The substitution of the Religion of Humanity for all other religions was Comte's final objective, and it was to bring about the 'mental and moral regeneration from which political regeneration would follow.'[15]

This is of course only the barest outline of a vast and intricate philosophical construct, and the reasons why this system appealed so powerfully to the Victorian mind are equally complex. In general terms, one might say that Comte provided a philosophical framework for many of the currents that were already in the mid-Victorian air. He preached order and progress to ears that could hardly have been more receptive to the message. Order was sorely needed in an age swept by tempestuous developments in intellectual and religious life, with the geologists appointing man to a humble and transient place in nature, with German biblical criticism throwing dark doubts on the authority of the Bible, and with the all-pervading concept of evolution looming

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[15] *Ibid.*

on the horizon. But deeply disturbing as these developments may have been, at the same time they held promise of immense progress, of the religious yoke being thrown off and social justice no longer being a utopian ideal. The idea of progress through science was deeply rooted in the Victorian consciousness, and Comte was able to provide it with a coherent philosophical context. Besides, Comte did not merely attack theology, he replaced it with a theology of his own, the Religion of Humanity. If, as Willey said, Comte epitomizes the Victorian age, that is because the age saw itself mirrored in his philosophy.

Among the first of Comte's advocates in Britain, John Stuart Mill played an essential role in introducing Comte's *Cours* to the British public. However, although he greatly admired Comte and thought the *Cours* a work of eminent importance, he was far from a true Comtean disciple. In his *Autobiography*, Mill assesses the debt he owed the French philosopher in the writing of the *System of Logic*:

> My obligations to Comte were only to his writings – to the part which had then been published of his 'Cours de Philosophie Positive': and . . . the amount of these obligations is far less than has sometimes been asserted. . . . I derived from him many valuable thoughts . . . but it is only in the concluding Book, on the Logic of the Moral Sciences, that I owe to him any radical improvement in my conception of the application of logical methods.[16]

The *System of Logic* is Mill's own philosophical *chef d'oeuvre*, and it is indisputably one of the seminal works in Victorian intellectual history. Leslie Stephen describes how the young graduates of the 1850s tested their philosophical mettle on Mill's work by endlessly discussing his teachings 'as keenly as medieval commentators used to discuss the doctrines of Aristotle.'[17] The *Logic* clearly was, as Annan put it, one of those books which capture the mind of a generation. We are not so much concerned here with the technicalities of Mill's method of logical reasoning as with the fact that the work raised some questions which were of immense consequence to the Victorian mind:

> Are the actions of human beings, like all other natural events, subject to invariable laws? Does that constancy of causation,

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[16] John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London, 1969), pp. 147–8.

[17] Leslie Stephen, *Some Early Impressions* (London, 1924), p. 76. Quoted from Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen. The Godless Victorian* (London, 1984), p. 175.

> which is the foundation of every scientific theory of successive phenomena, really obtain among them?[18]

These questions Mill answered boldly in the affirmative. The principle which underlies the whole of his work (and so much of Victorian philosophy and philosophizing) is that of the oneness of nature. Effective reasoning is to Mill impossible if it is not founded on the premise that nature is governed by unalterable laws. And since man is emphatically part of nature, and the same laws operate on him as on the rest of the organic world, the methods of science should also be able to unlock the secrets of mankind:

> . . . the science of Human Nature may be said to exist, in proportion as those approximate truths, which compose a practical knowledge of mankind, can be exhibited as corollaries from the universal laws of human nature on which they rest.[19]

Mill far from underestimated the difficulty of establishing a science of human nature, and it is clear that such a doctrine held vast implications, which were as disturbing to the theologians as they were full of scientific promise for the rationalist. For one thing, 'religion' saw the exclusive right to moral values wrested from its hands. If natural phenomena are all that man can know, and man is himself such a phenomenon, then morality too is an element of nature, and subject to the laws which apply throughout nature. It logically follows that there are no scientific reasons for believing that morality has its origins in religion. From the science of human nature and morality that Mill envisaged, religion was epistemologically excluded.

Mill also paved the way for a naturalistic science of psychology. Natural law operates in the human mind as it does in all natural phenomena, so that there is no reason why the mind should not be fruitfully subjected to scientific inquiry. However, Mill himself did not make the step which many of his followers saw as only logical: regarding mind as matter. The science of phrenology, the physiological study of the brain as the exclusive organ of the mind, was practised with enthusiasm by many leading Victorian intellectuals and enjoyed great success in the vulgarized version of 'bump-reading'. The general notion of mind as matter was to become one of the central rationalist tenets.[20]

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[18] Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 33.

[19] John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic*, 2nd ed. (London, 1846), p. 502.

[20] For a summary account of the history of phrenology and its influence, see Diana Postlethwaite, *Making It Whole. A Victorian Circle and the Shape of Their World* (Columbus, 1984), pp. 59–71.

The one law which Mill saw as ultimately regulating all the manifold laws of nature was 'the Law of Causation'. Universal causation entails that every natural phenomenon may be traced to natural causes. So it is for Mill with the human mind:

> . . . given the motives which are present to an individual's mind, and given likewise the character and disposition of the individual, the manner in which he will act may be unerringly inferred: that if we knew the person thoroughly, and we knew all the inducements which are acting upon him, we could foretell his conduct with as much certainty as we can predict any physical event.[21]

In the following chapters we will see how this principle was to become an important cornerstone for Robertson's theory of scientific literary criticism. Mill's views on causality in history were equally influential. Since to Mill history is a process of organic, natural phenomena, the discovery of the laws which govern that process, by combining the study of history with that of human nature, opens up infinite possibilities. Through knowledge of those laws

> we may hereafter succeed not only in looking far forward into the future history of the human race, but in determining what artificial means may be used, and to what extent, to accelerate the natural progress in so far as it is beneficial; to compensate for whatever may be its inherent inconveniences or disadvantages; and to guard against the dangers or accidents to which our species is exposed from the necessary incidents of its progression.[22]

This quotation links Mill with Comte in two ways. First of all, there is the belief in progress, which was such a typical characteristic of Victorian thought. Mill leaves no doubt about his faith in the process of continual progression in mankind, claiming confidently that 'the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving occasional exceptions, one of improvement; a tendency towards a better and happier state.'[23] However, both Mill and Comte assert that this tendency towards improvement should not be left to itself. In both their philosophical systems, the concern for social and moral reform was an ingrained element, as it was to be in the work of Herbert Spencer and somewhat less central figures such as G.H. Lewes, Frederic Harrison, and J.M. Robertson himself. British philosophy in the nineteenth century was of a predominantly practical nature, built on the British empiricist tradition but

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[21] Mill, *A System of Logic*, p. 486.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 617.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 595.

infused with new ideals of social change. Of this brand of rationalist philosophy, Comte and Mill may be said to have been the two founding fathers.

Mill's doctrine of universal causation was embraced without exception in the circle of Victorian intellectuals among whom he moved. In her book *Making it Whole. A Victorian Circle and the Shape of Their World*, Diana Postlethwaithe provides valuable insight into the way these figures were interrelated, both biographically and intellectually. This is not to suggest that they constitute a strictly homogeneous group; as Postlethwaithe points out, its members are drawn from a diverse range of intellectual vocations. The two central figures, Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, we have already discussed. The other intellectuals Postlethwaite considered qualified for membership were George Combe (1788–1858) and Robert Chambers (1802–1871), Charles Bray (1811–1884) and Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), George Henry Lewes and Herbert Spencer, and finally George Eliot. It is not difficult to see that in this circle, there was no lack of diversity in fields of interest. Combe was a prominent phrenologist, whereas Chambers shocked Victorian orthodoxy by his advocacy of pre-Darwinian evolutionary theory. Bray and Martineau were drawn to mesmerism as providing a religion based on the scientific world view. There were few disciplines in which George Henry Lewes was not proficient, be it literary criticism, editing, physiology, philosophy, or the history of ideas, whereas Herbert Spencer built a philosophical system of massive proportions on scientific foundations. The name of George Eliot, finally, needs no introduction, and many of the ideas circulating among these writers permeate her novels.

But different though the work of the members of this Victorian circle may have been in emphasis and detail, they shared the same positivist, scientific, indeed rationalist cosmology, which Comte and Mill had done so much to promote. Then, in 1859, the world was published which gave an unprecedented impetus to the rationalist spirit: Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. However, before it is at all possible to discuss the impact of Darwin's theory of evolution, we had better first examine who the intellectuals were for whom Darwin became the prophet of a new age.

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This book could not have been written without the generous help I have received from many quarters. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Dr. F.J.M. Korsten and Dr. J.M. Bloem, whose support and scholarly advice have never failed me in the course of this project.

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The staffs and authorities of the following libraries and institutions have also been most helpful in answering my queries and allowing me access to manuscripts and printed books: Cambridge University Library; Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library; House of Lords Record Office; International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam; Reading University Library; Rijks Library, The Hague; University of Iowa, Special Collections Department; University of Michigan, Special Collections Library; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Wilson Library, Special thanks are due to the staff of the South Place Ethical Society library at Conway Hall, London, for letting me browse through their unequalled collection of freethought literature for hours at a time.

I am much indebted to Jim Herrick of the Rationalist Press Association for having introduced me to Robertson's life and the secularist movement with me, and also for introducing me to Terry Mullins, former Secretary of the National Secular Society, who has spent many fruitful hours doing library research in this book. Her memory will be cherished.

Finally, Mrs. Mary Turner has typed the manuscript with great diligence and patience, and for all her advice and help I am very grateful.

In this book *Men, Science and Religion*, Frank Miller Turner discusses this generation of thinkers, who are directly descended from and partly overlap with the circle described by Postlethwaite. He refers to them as the champions of the new Pascal, who turned their backs on supernaturalism and found the 'nerve-points of reference for the organization and direction of life in a nature ruled by law and regularity'. Their collective task was the establishment of a culture based on secular principles.

However, before that could be achieved, two requirements had to be met:

> First, the ordinary Englishman must be persuaded to look toward rational, scientific, and secular ideas to solve his problems and to interpret his experiences rather than toward Christian, metaphysical, or other prescientific modes of thought. Second, scientifically trained and scientifically oriented men must supplant clergymen and Christian laymen as educators and leaders of English culture.[24]

To describe this particular ideological stance, far more aggressively anti–theological and pro–science than the generation of Comte and Mill, Turner suggests the use of the term 'scientific naturalism'. He prefers it to the term 'rationalism', which to him fails 'to suggest the crucial role of science in addition to critical reasoning'. However, as he elsewhere claims that 'its exponents aligned themselves with the specific physical theories of the third quarter of the century', scientific naturalism may be seen as a particular manifestation of the Victorian rationalist spirit.

Who were these exponents of scientific naturalism? The main figures are described by Turner:

> The leadership of this effort to educate and to persuade the public consisted of [Thomas Henry] Huxley himself, professor of biology at the Royal School of Mines and chief apologist for Charles Darwin; John Tyndall, a physicist and successor to Faraday as superintendent of the Royal Institution; Herbert Spencer, the philosopher par excellence of evolution; W.K. Clifford, an outspoken mathematician at University College, London; and Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, a eugenicist, a statistician, and an advocate of professionalism in science. Another coterie related to this core but more closely related with English Positivism included Frederic Harrison, a lawyer and leading English Positivist; John Morley, a freethinker and the editor of *Fortnightly Review*, in which most of these men published; and G.H. Lewes, Positivist, historian, and psychologist. Anthropologists, such as Edward Tylor and John Lubbock, extended the theories of science into the study of society. Biologist E. Ray Lankester and physician Henry Maudsley wrote and spoke on behalf of naturalistic ideas. Among essayists and men of letters who advocated the cause of science, Leslie Stephen was the

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[24] Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion. The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London, 1974), p. 9.

> outstanding author. He was joined by lesser literary figures such as Grant Allen and Edward Clodd.[25]

This list, as Turner rightly adds, is far from exhaustive, and, among other names, that of J.M. Robertson would certainly merit inclusion. These men were instrumental in establishing science as the only possible way to truth. Extremely powerful and versatile as propagandists of the cult of science, they represented a very real and serious threat to established religion. It was in the years when the enthusiasm for science was at its peak, the 1870s and 1880s, that books such as John Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) and Andrew White's *The Warfare of Science* (1876) were written, the titles suggestive of the militancy of the scientific naturalists and their opposition to metaphysics and theology.[26]

More recent research, however, has shown that this black-and-white opposition between science and religion is in need of considerable qualification. Robert M. Young has stated his belief 'that there is little evidence to show that any of the principal figures in the debate were antitheistic, much less atheistic.'[27] In fact, no one is more eager to point this out than J.M. Robertson himself, who is particularly adept at detecting lingering traces of theist sympathy in the works of the champions of rationalism. He deeply deplored such a conciliatory statement as made by Mill in his posthumously published essay on 'Theism' to the effect that

> we may well conclude that the influences of religion on the character which will remain after rational criticism has done its utmost against the evidences of religion, are well worth preserving, and that what they lack in direct strength as compared with those of a firmer belief, is more than compensated by the greater strength of the morality they sanction.[28]

Nor could Robertson condone Herbert Spencer's view, expressed in his *First Principles*, that religion was altogether outside the realm of science, since for

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[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

[26] The Victorian conflict between science and religion has been the subject of innumerable studies. See *Victorian Science and Religion: a bibliography with emphasis on evolution, belief, unbelief, comprised of work published from c. 1900–1975*, eds Sidney Eisen and Bernard V. Lightman (Hamden, 1984).

[27] Robert M. Young, 'The Impact of Darwin on Conventional Thought', in *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*, ed. Anthony Symondson (London, 1970), pp. 13–37.

[28] J.S. Mill, 'Theism', in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill. Volume X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. F.E.L. Priestley (London, 1981–6), p. 488. For Robertson's reaction, see for instance his *Modern Humanists* (London, 1891), pp. 80–5.

Spencer's involved supposition that 'Religion, everywhere present as a landscape through the weft of human history, expresses some eternal fact.'[29] It is clear, therefore, that even the great figureheads of rationalism were prepared to discuss shades of grey rather than see the world in black and white terms. Chapter 1 represents a first step towards redressing this imbalance by presenting Robertson's life against the background of the late-Victorian conflict between religion and science. Part 1 will show that Robertson's early education in Scotland was dominated by the Calvinist orthodoxy of the Free Church, and that his subsequent rejection of religion was not the result of a sudden conversion, but rather a gradual transformation through the influence of Victorian agnostic thinkers. Part 2 will show how Robertson's rejection of religion led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of rationalism in the context of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periodical press.

Chapter 2 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1891, when he moved to London to take up a position as leader writer on the *National Reformer*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's rationalism led him to the study of sociology, and how he developed his own brand of sociological theory in opposition to the ideas of Herbert Spencer. Part 2 will show how Robertson's sociological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of Matthew Arnold. Part 3 will show how Robertson's literary criticism led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Benjamin Disraeli.

Chapter 3 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1902, when he moved to Westminster to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily Chronicle*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of Alfred Marshall. Part 2 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Henry Thomas Buckle. Part 3 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Sir James George Frazer.

Chapter 4 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1907, when he moved to Bedford Park to take up a position as leader writer on the *Morning Leader*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of William James. Part 2 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of sociology, and how he developed his own brand of sociological theory in opposition to the ideas of Emile Durkheim. Part 3 will show how Robertson's sociological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of Walter Raleigh.

Chapter 5 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1912, when he moved to Gower Street to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily Chronicle*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Graham Wallas. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 6 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1919, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 7 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1927, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 8 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1931, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 9 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1936, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 10 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1941, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 11 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1946, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 12 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1951, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 13 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1956, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 14 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1961, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 15 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1966, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 16 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1971, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 17 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1976, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 18 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1981, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 19 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1986, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 20 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1991, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 21 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 1996, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 22 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2001, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 23 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2006, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 24 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2011, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 25 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2016, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 26 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2021, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 27 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2026, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 28 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2031, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 29 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2036, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 30 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2041, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 31 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2046, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 32 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2051, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 33 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2056, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 34 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2061, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 35 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2066, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 36 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2071, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 37 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2076, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 38 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2081, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

Chapter 39 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2086, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

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Chapter 41 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2096, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's literary theories led him to the study of politics, and how he developed his own brand of political theory in opposition to the ideas of Harold Laski. Part 2 will show how Robertson's political theories led him to the study of economics, and how he developed his own brand of economic theory in opposition to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Part 3 will show how Robertson's economic theories led him to the study of history, and how he developed his own brand of historical theory in opposition to the ideas of Arnold Toynbee.

Chapter 42 takes up the story of Robertson's life in 2101, when he moved to Bloomsbury to take up a position as leader writer on the *Daily News*. Part 1 will show how Robertson's historical theories led him to the study of religion, and how he developed his own brand of religious theory in opposition to the ideas of Rudolf Otto. Part 2 will show how Robertson's religious theories led him to the study of psychology, and how he developed his own brand of psychological theory in opposition to the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Part 3 will show how Robertson's psychological theories led him to the study of literature, and how he developed his own brand of literary criticism in opposition to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.

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physically to its environment, and these adaptations are preserved in future generations. The famous example is that of the giraffe, which was supposed to have obtained its long neck through having to find its food in the tall branches of trees. Lamarck's theory of evolution through adaptation has been his chief claim to fame.

Chapter 4
The life of J.M. Robertson

Introduction

In 1844 a book appeared which played an important role in the popularization of the evolutionary idea. This book was the *Vestiges of Creation*, published anonymously, but written by Robert Chambers, journalist and popular educator, editor of *Chambers's Journal*, and author of some thirty books on history, literature and biography. It was firmly built on the belief in natural law and the uniformity of nature which we have already seen:

> If there is anything more than another impressed on our minds by the course of the geological history, it is, that the same laws and conditions of nature now apparent to us have existed throughout the whole time, though the operation of some of these laws may now be less conspicuous than in the early ages, from some of the conditions having come to a settlement and a close.[1]

Chambers was far from the heretic that some of his outraged critics denounced him as. In actual fact, Chambers was a theist who saw the hand of God in the way nature was in continuous development. In his view, progress and development were processes directed by God, albeit not the orthodox Christian God.

Although Chambers's work achieved both great popularity and notoriety, it was felt by the scientific community that it was distinctly lacking in meticulous scientific method. That charge could hardly be brought against the work of Herbert Spencer, self–taught scientific philosopher, who spent a lifetime constructing a system of philosophy in which the whole of human knowledge and experience could find its proper place. The details of Spencer's evolutionary thought do not concern us here, but it is important to note that Spencer came very close to discovering the principle which was to confer scientific authority on Darwin's evolutionary theory. It was Spencer, who coined the famous term 'survival of the fittest', often ascribed to Darwin himself.

In fact, it was not primarily Darwin's *evolutionism* which shocked the Victorian intellectual world. As we have seen, when Darwin published his *Origin of Species*, the idea of evolution, of development as opposed to creationism, was very much in the air. Its message of progress as an inevitable characteristic of natural processes could not help but appeal to an age in which

[1] Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Edinburgh, 1844), p. 148. Quoted from Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, p. 179.

The Scottish Years: 1856–1884[2]

John Mackinnon Robertson, 'that most erudite of late Victorians', was born at Brodick in the Isle of Arran on 14 November 1856. He was the second son of John Robertson, of Perthshire, and Susan, daughter of John Mackinnon, of

[2] The main source for this section of Robertson's biography is the short account of Robertson's life by J.P. Gilmour which is prefixed, together with appreciations by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Ernest Newman, and John A. Hobson, to the 1930 edition of Robertson's *History of Freethought . . . to the Period of the French Revolution*. Notes are only given here when information from other sources than Gilmour is used.

[3] *Minutes of the Rainbow Circle, 1894–1924*, ed. Michael Freeden (London, 1989), p. 13.

the belief in progress was so deeply rooted. What made Darwin's work scientifically innovative and at the same time deeply disturbing was the principle of natural selection, and its application to man. Natural selection, briefly put, builds on a number of basic propositions.[33] The first is that organisms vary randomly, that 'under changing conditions of life organisms present individual differences in almost every part of their structure'. Then, in order for these variations to be preserved in the struggle for life, they must be hereditary:

> But if variations useful to any organic being ever do occur, assuredly individuals thus characterised will have the best chance of being preserved in the struggle for life; and from the strong principle of inheritance, these will tend to produce offspring similarly characterised.

The final proposition is that this principle of preservation ultimately works to the benefit of each individual organism, that it 'leads to the improvement of each creature in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life; and consequently, in most cases, to what must be regarded as an advance in organisation.' Herbert Spencer may have coined the term 'survival of the fittest', but it is in Darwin's theory that it thus gained its full significance.

Here is how the rationalist historian of ideas A.W. Benn saw the impact of this principle of natural selection in 1906:

> Moreover, the theory of natural selection, among other incidental consequences, has had the effect of greatly extending our hopes of what may be done in the way of scientific explanation. For here was a method of hitherto unsuspected power, which, when once brought to bear on the problems of biology, exhibited them in an entirely new light, suggesting an alternative explanation of what had hitherto been attributed to design, utterly fatal to the confident inferences of Paley and his school. Darwin might be right or wrong; but all felt that he was working on truly scientific lines, while the method of his theological opponents appeared by comparison utterly obsolete and illusory.[34]

Darwin's principle of natural selection was considered scientific proof for the deeply felt conviction, so prevalent among the Victorian intellectuals since Comte and Mill, that nature was one and indivisible, that man was as much part of nature as any animal. For the scientific naturalists, this did not so much

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[33] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, Everyman ed. (London, 1928), pp. 124–5.

[34] A.W. Benn, *The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols (London, 1906), II, p. 165.

suggest a picture of 'nature red in tooth and claw' – which the discoveries in geology had evoked for Tennyson's generation – as it opened up a vista of endless promise. As William Irvine said of Huxley:

> He defended Darwinian evolution because it seemed to constitute, for terrestrial life, a scientific truth as significant and far-reaching as Newton's for the stellar universe – more particularly, because it seemed to promise that human life itself, by learning the laws of its being, might one day become scientifically rational and controlled.[35]

That this constituted a powerful repudiation of any supernaturalist claims to truth is beyond doubt. At the same time, as Benn asserts in the above quote, the principle of natural selection was itself considered the epitome of science, a beautiful example of what could be achieved by means of the most advanced scientific method and the highest attainment of scientific naturalism so far. Darwin became the saint of the myth of science, and when that myth reached its peak in the 1870s, Darwin's work became generalized into a theory which was used not only to explain all processes of change but also to justify them. Susan Budd describes how

> Around his ideas grew ever-thicker layers of interpretation, theory and generalization, as they were extended to aesthetic, political and metaphysical doctrines. The original statement became ever more general and moralized, and less clearly related to each other and the evidence.[36]

The cult of Darwin and the cult of science ended up inextricably mixed, and the mixture was used as a potent weapon against theology.

Rationalism and Biblical Criticism: Essays and Reviews

In the mean time, biblical criticism was making its own contribution to the rise of rationalism. March 1860 saw the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, a collection of critical treatises which created an immense furore.[37] For its

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[35] William Irvine, *Apes, Angels, and Victorians. The Story of Darwin, Huxley and Evolution* (New York, 1955), p. 7.

[36] Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, p. 137.

[37] For a comprehensive history of the *Essays and Reviews* controversy, see Ieuan Ellis's *Seven Against Christ. A Study of 'Essays and Reviews'* (Leiden, 1980). See also Basil Willey, 'Septem Contra Christum', in *More Nineteenth Century Studies* (London, 1956), pp. 137–85.

always the reader of this sort may seem easy to imagine. The book had been, [14] and since Robertson's method of biblical criticism ran right against Jowett's appeal to the liberal intellectuality of theology do not strike us now as particularly revolutionary. However, when William Archer, who was then a student at Edinburgh University, read Robertson's opening article in the *Edinburgh Evening News* in 1875, he had been a leading figure in the Edinburgh Secularist Society, and found himself at the head of a heresy-hunt. What made this worse was that Archer and Robertson were young men who had been friends since 1873, when they had met as members of the Rationalist Press Association. [15] Archer had been greatly impressed by Robertson's first pamphlet, *Christianity and Mythology*, published in 1873, and had sought out the author, who was then living in Edinburgh. [16] Soon they were working together on the *Edinburgh Evening News*, which Archer had founded as a Radical organ, and which, in the following year, was to publish Robertson's articles on Herbert Spencer. Once, when asked by a concerned northern clergyman to which denomination his young men in general belonged, he had answered in an off-hand tone: 'Ou, mainly Atheists.' [17]

There is little doubt that Robertson, as one of these young men, had indeed become an atheist. He wrote to his friend Dobell: "I gave up the "divine" notion in my teens: when I came to probe thoroughly the "human" problem I was long past attaching any meaning whatever to the "divine" conception." [18] He was gradually becoming more and more involved in the secularist movement, which was gaining popularity as well as notoriety in the years between 1874 and 1880. [19] In September 1878 Robertson attended a lecture by the redoubtable figurehead of the secularist movement, Charles Bradlaugh:

> Holding their views they cannot, consistently with moral honesty, maintain their posts as clergymen of the Established Church. We see more danger in the shape of widespread suspicion and distrust likely to arise from their continuance as teachers of that Church, whilst clearly believing her doctrines, than from their fucubrations themselves.

Subsequently, the book was condemned by the bishops, and the affair reached an unpleasant climax when, in 1862, Wilson and Williams were tried in the Court of Arches and found guilty of heresy. It was not until two years later that they were acquitted on appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.

The *Essays and Reviews* may show us how beside the point it would be to equate rationalism with only the extreme manifestations of unbelief. Here the rationalist spirit is seen to operate from *within* theology, rather than as an attack from the outside. Science and the laws of development and progress are applied to religion and theology by the authors with varying degrees of incisiveness. Take, for instance, Mark Pattison in his 'Tendencies of Religious Thought in England, 1688–1750':

> But what Christianity had been in the past, what they had been to it, was the result of the whole of their antecedents. The history of a party may be written on the theory of periodical oscillation; but the who[20] wishes to trace the descent of religious thought, and the practical

[14] Robertson, 'Speech on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday', p. 23.

[15] William Archer, *Life, Work and Friendships*, (London, 1931), p. 74. In this biography, Charles Archer also provides transcripts of the following letters between the two friends: WA to JMR, 21 October 1881; JMR to WA, 23 October 1881; WA to JMR, 26 October 1881; JMR to WA, 28 October 1881; WA to JMR, 2 November 1882; JMR to WA, 6 July 1923. The letter from JMR of 23 October 1881 is also printed in The DNB entry on Robertson, ed. L.M. Scharlieb (London, 1925), p. 111.

[16] C. Archer, *William Archer*, p. 74.

[17] Robertson, 'Speech on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday', p. 23.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Robertson to Dobell, 3 February 1906; Robertson's correspondence with his friend and bookseller Bertram Dobell is in the Bodleian Library, MS Dobell C 43, ff. 12–83.

[20] Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans. Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester, 1980), pp. 1–22, p. 111.

> working of the religious ideas, must follow those through all the phases they have actually assumed. We have not yet learnt, in this country, to write our ecclesiastical history in any better fashion than that of praising up the party that cast out the Church which should happen to be wrong. Still farther are we from thinking an attempt to apply the laws of thought and of the development of opinion to the course of English theology,[39] as was contained in Watson's 'Apology'[21] – a work which has led probably more men to Freethought than it has established in orthodoxy – I slowly reasoned myself out of orthodoxy, and only retained a vague belief in a somewhat abstract Deity, with, I think, an equally attenuated notion of immortality.[22]

Such a statement, with its emphasis on history as a causal process to be studied with scientific disinterestedness, shows rationalism at work *within* the domain of theology, as it was increasingly to do in the years after the publication of *Essays and Reviews*.

Agnosticism

Robertson's falling from faith may not have been quite as smooth a process as this account suggests. His parents were apparently very religious,[23] and consequently pained by this gradual and quite irreversible change of opinion.[24] However, the secularist circles in which Robertson now moved provided a strong stimulus to throw off any final remnants of religious belief.

The history of the 'crisis of faith' – as it has traditionally been called – resulting from such developments as described above is clearly a highly complex one. An important role in this history is played by those rationalists or scientific naturalists who referred to themselves as 'agnostics'. The term 'agnostic' was coined by Thomas Henry Huxley, 'Darwin's bulldog' and one of the foremost scientists of the age, to define his position in theological matters among the members of the famous Metaphysical Society.[25] During its existence from 1869 to 1880, the members of this illustrious society met nine times a year in London to listen to each other's papers and to discuss the deeper philosophical and religious issues of the age. The membership list reads like a catalogue of the major English thinkers of the time. Membership included orthodox Christians such as Archbishop (later Cardinal) Manning (1808–1892), R.W. Church (1815–1890), W.E. Gladstone (1809–1898), and Connop Thirlwall (1797–1875), as well as liberal-minded religious thinkers like A.P. Stanley (1815–1818) and F.D. Maurice (1805–1872). On the opposite side of the religious scale there were such doubters and rationalists as J.A. Froude (1818–1894), Frederic Harrison, John Morley, W.K. Clifford (1845–1879) and Leslie Stephen. In search of an 'ism' to label his line of reasoning among this chequered company, Huxley hit upon 'agnosticism'. Among like-minded rationalists, the term then rapidly gained currency, aided by Leslie Stephen's propagandistic prowess.[26]

Edinburgh was not a particularly active centre of secularism, but there was a vigorous circle of Bradlaugh-followers, led by John Lees, a rope and twine manufacturer who was a vice-president of Bradlaugh's National Secular Society (N.S.S.) and a close personal friend of its leader.[27] Robertson joined the Edinburgh Secular Society, and in the early 1880s he became the leader of a group of young fellow secularists, who drew attention to themselves by their vigorous propaganda of freethought and secularism in the face of unbending Scottish orthodoxy. In addition to Robertson, the members of this group were Thomas Carlaw Martin, a Post Office administrator, who later became editor of the *Scottish Leader* and was given a knighthood for his editorial services in support of the legal case for the union of the United Presbyterian and Free Churches; W.E. Snell, of the Queen's Remembrancer's Office; Joseph Mazzini Wheeler, an accomplished scholar of freethought, whose mental instability

[21] Richard Watson (1737–1816) was the author of *Apology for the Bible, in Answer to Thomas Paine* (1796).

[22] J.M. Robertson, *National Reformer* (8 February 1891), pp. 83–4.

[23] Mary Patrick, 'Leaders in Religious Thought in England, 1688–1750', an unpublished Ph.D. thesis (London, 1961), pp. 255–6.

[24] Robertson to Edward Henry, 16 June 1931. This letter is a reply to a young man who was troubled with religious doubts. Robertson urged him to read Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* (1857–61), Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874), and Lecky's *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (1865), and advised him to 'be aggressive about the origins of the current religious beliefs in the defence of the Metaphysical Society, etc. Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (Baltimore and London, 1987), pp. 51–2.

[25] Royden Harrison, *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian*, pp. 7–33.

[26] Leslie Stephen, 'Famous Freethinkers I have known – VIII', *Freethinker* (5 September 1915), p. 570.

[27] Robertson, *Letters and Leaves*, p. 10. Five letters from Lees to Robertson are preserved in the Bishopsgate Library, London.

The definition of agnosticism provided by Bernard Lightman places the agnostic squarely in the anti–metaphysical Victorian system of thought:

> The essence of agnosticism was epistemological. Although often directed at claims to certain knowledge of God, agnosticism could as easily say that claims to knowledge of self or an external world composed of matter are baseless. Any object that could be termed part of the transcendental or noumenal world was considered to be beyond the limits of human knowledge.[42]

In this way, Lightman refutes the claims that agnosticism was in essence hostile towards Christianity, atheistical, and certainly irreligious. Agnosticism was primarily a profession of ignorance, and agnostics like Huxley and Stephen agreed that the human mind was incapable of gaining absolute knowledge about God, but that the existence of such a God was therefore not necessarily ruled out.

In fact, many of the agnostics, who ranged in their rejection of Christianity from vehemence to sorrow, possessed deeply religious sensibilities. If they did not believe in the doctrines of Christianity, they did believe religiously in the new creed of science and nature. In an age of material and scientific progress, the agnostics found in Darwin's evolutionism the scientific justification for their belief that they were building a new world in which the moral restraints imposed by Christianity would be supplanted by a moral science founded on the laws of nature. Moved by a profound moral fervour, they turned the tables on religion and accused orthodox Christianity of deeply ingrained immorality. To give up organized religion was *not* to give up morality; in fact, it was the abandonment of Christianity which was the first step to attaining truth, which was every man's moral duty. Ultimately, the agnostics were as much concerned with the foundation of a new faith as with the destruction of the traditional faith which they saw as obstructing the path to truth.

Varieties of Unbelief: Secularism and Materialism

Agnosticism is perhaps the best known variety of Victorian unbelief which may broadly be ranged under the ideology of scientific naturalism. However, agnosticism was both in competition and entangled with a multitude of other 'strands of unbelief'. One of those strands we have already come across in the first chapter: Bradlaugh's working–class secularism, 'made out of scraps of

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[42] Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism*, p. 40.

science and positivism',[43] with its strong politically radical orientation. The high–minded middle–class agnostics were far removed from what they perceived as the smoky, somewhat rowdy atmosphere of the 'Halls of Science', nor were they happy to be ranked among the followers of Comte. Although they shared with Positivists such as Richard Congreve, Edward Beesley and Frederic Harrison the scientific world–view, they were repelled by the ritualism founded on Comte's later works. In Huxley's well–known words: 'Comte's philosophy, in practice might be compendiously described as Catholicism minus Christianity.'[44] How could the foundation of a pseudo–religion lead to anything other than pseudo–science?

One charge frequently levelled at the agnostics was that of being materialists. This referred in particular to the doctrine of scientific materialism which is associated with the names of the German scientists Karl Vogt (1817–1894), Jakob Moleschott (1822–1893) and Ludwig Büchner (1824–1899). This type of materialism was an almost exclusively German phenomenon which was developed during the 1840s. Its most famous exposition was Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff* of 1854 (English translation 1870), the title indicating the materialist's belief that the universe consisted of force and matter only. The doctrine is explained by Owen Chadwick:

> The axiom was physical. Force means matter and matter force. Therefore 'spiritual' force is nonsense. Creation is impossible because matter must be eternal and can only change, cannot be added to. Creation equals force and therefore cannot have existed before matter.[45]

In such a system, religion naturally has no place. If the mind and the spirit are matter, what is the point of discussing something like an eternal soul? The materialists' rejection of religion is of the most strenuous kind, although materialism itself, as Mandelbaum points out, is fundamentally a metaphysical position.[46] It was because of this, the fact that materialism replaced one metaphysical hypothesis with another, however 'scientific', that most agnostics were eager to dissociate themselves from Büchner and his followers. It should

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[43] Noel Annan, 'The Strands of Unbelief', in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians* (London, 1949), pp. 150–7.

[44] T.H. Huxley, *Method and Results: Essays* (New York, 1897), p. 158. Quoted from Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism*, p. 23.

[45] Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 173.

[46] Mandelbaum, 'Philosophic Movements in the Nineteenth Century', p. 19.

be noted that there was a strong connection between secularism and materialism in Bradlaugh's friendship with Büchner.[47]

Conclusion

This last statement brings us back to Charles Bradlaugh, the man to whom Robertson owed such a great intellectual debt. The past pages have been an attempt not so much to give a precise characterization of nineteenth century rationalism, as to provide an overview of some of the most important rationalist impulses. For one thing, such an attempt shows the difficulty of artificially disentangling currents and movements which, in actual reality, were never perceived as separate. However, the above overview may help to elucidate some of Robertson's more theoretical viewpoints, and to give him his proper place in a long line of rationalist thinkers.

Part 2: Robertson as a Rationalist Thinker

Introduction

Of the many terms which may be used to label J.M. Robertson as a writer and thinker, rationalist is the one I have chosen for here. In a sense, secularist, Liberal or freethinker are equally plausible designations, but rationalist seems to me to be most broadly and generally descriptive of Robertson's theoretical and philosophical position. Also, it immediately places him in the complex movement of thought outlined in the previous section.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, there are many sides to nineteenth–century British rationalist thought, and the suggestion that we are dealing with a coherent world view is dubious at best. Robertson, however, had few doubts about what constituted the actual core of rationalist thought and lent the whole movement cohesion as well as direction. His characterization of the true rationalist is unambiguously anti–religionist as 'one who rejects the claims of 'revelation,' the idea of a personal God, the belief in personal immortality, and in general the conceptions logically accruing to the practices of prayer and worship.'[48] The same applies to his definition of freethought, the term he himself finally seems to have preferred to rationalism as more suggestive of the throwing off of religious shackles:

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[47] David Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, (London, 1971), pp. 149, 212.

[48] *Rationalism* (London, 1912), p. 4.

> Freethought may be defined as a conscious reaction against some phase or phases of conventional or traditional doctrine in religion – on the one hand, a claim to think freely, in the sense not of disregard for logic, but of special loyalty to it, on problems to which the past course of things has given a great intellectual and practical importance; on the other, the actual practice of such thinking.[49]

Although the latter definition is somewhat wider, both definitions boil down to the same radically anti–religious stance. The basic opposition between rationalism and naturalism on the one hand, and religion and supernaturalism on the other hand is the driving–force behind the bulk of his work. Robertson left no room for subtle gradations. For him, the warfare between rationalism (with science as its natural ally) and religion was a living reality, and there was no other choice than between these two camps. At present, rationalism was still at a disadvantage, locked in combat with a formidable opponent, since the battle was 'broadly one between unpaid freelances and an army of professional defenders'.[50] However, the rationalist spirit was gradually gaining ground, and it was the rationalist's task to look both forward and backward: backward, to find evidence for the eventual victory of rationalism in the progress of unbelief through the ages, and forward, to enlist as many new campaigners in the rationalist army as possible, so as to speed up the gradual progress towards a world ruled by reason.

Of this dual task, Robertson's histories of freethought represent perhaps the most telling examples. *A Short History of Freethought, Ancient and Modern* was first published in 1899, and, over the years, became one of Robertson's best–known and best–selling works. For over three decades, he continued to revise and add to it, so that it finally came to comprise four volumes. The first two volumes, entitled *A History of Freethought, Ancient and Modern, to the Period of the French Revolution*, reached their definitive form in the fourth edition of 1936, while the two subsequent volumes, *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (an expansion of the brief account which appeared in the first *Short History*), saw the light in 1930. Together they represent a remarkable achievement in terms of scholarship and grasp of historical data, and may well constitute Robertson's greatest claim to fame as a rationalist writer outside the field of literature. The contributions to rationalist progress through the centuries by hundreds of 'humanists', ranging from the generally famous to the particularly obscure, are carefully charted, and add up to a vast panorama of which the unmistakable message (unmistakable, that is, to the

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[49] *A History of Freethought Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols (London, 1936), I, p. 10.

[50] *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols (London, 1929), I, p. 3.

convinced rationalist) can only be that religion is gradually but inevitably giving way to the rise of unbelief. How can a philosophy which appears to be backed up by the entire course of western intellectual history not be infinitely superior to a religion founded merely on unproven hypotheses and dubious authority? This is the question that may be read between the lines of every page of Robertson's historical accounts of freethought, and the answer to which is never obscured by the obstacles – sometimes formidable enough – religion continues to throw in the way of the rationalists' advance.

What should be made clear at this point is that Robertson's uncompromising opposition to religion is much more the *basis* for his development as a thinker than its *outcome*. Once Robertson had established for himself in his youth that he was an unbeliever, it was his unquestioned, dogmatic unbelief which became the starting-point for most of his non-literary work. Robertson's rationalism is therefore a bold statement of unbelief first and foremost. The theoretical, philosophical and scholarly details were sketched in later in the many volumes in which he attempted to discredit the religion of Christianity.

In general terms these attempts were founded on the view proposed in the eighteenth century in David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* that the springs of religious feeling were not vaguely divine but belonged to the very definite reality revealed to us by our senses; that religion, like any other natural phenomenon, was subject to the principle of causality. In his books on religion and Christianity, of which *Pagan Christs* and *Christianity and Mythology* are arguably the most important,[51] Robertson examines the origins of religion, reaching the conclusion (although one might argue that it is really the premise underlying his whole line of reasoning) that religion is essentially the result of man's failure to come to terms with the natural circumstances of his existence, a leap in the dark when sufficient rational light is as yet unavailable. Religion, to Robertson, 'consists *primarily* in a surmise or conception, reached by way of simple animism, of the causation and control of Nature (including human life) in terms of quasi-human personalities, whether or not defined as extra-Natural.'[52] In order to retain a measure of control over his natural surroundings, primitive man framed explanatory myths for himself which,

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[51] The articles Robertson published on the religious question in the *National Reformer* early in his career were later revised and expanded into books which mostly appeared between 1897 and 1903. In addition to *A Short History of Freethought*, we find *The Dynamics of Religion* (London, 1897), *Studies in Religious Fallacy* (London, 1900), *Christianity and Mythology* (London, 1900), *A Short History of Christianity* (London, 1902), and *Pagan Christs* (London, 1903). In later years, Robertson continued to revise and expand most of these books, which often ran to several editions.

[52] *Pagan Christs*, p. 57.

however, proved remarkably persistent in the course of history. Not surprisingly, Robertson particularly regretted the survival of the Christian myth, which he saw as one among many mythical fabrications rendered obsolete by the advent of new and rational knowledge. The science of mythology was to ensure that Christianity would be divested of its claims to special authority, and that Jesus would be viewed as a historically non-exceptional figure who represented a particular mythical context, not a historical reality. The foundation of Robertson's theory of the non-historicity of Jesus is to be found in his *Pagan Christs* and *Christianity and Mythology*; later he devoted three smaller volumes to this question: *The Historical Jesus. A Survey of Positions* (1916), *The Jesus Problem. A Restatement of the Myth Theory* (1917), and *Jesus and Judas. A Textual and Historical Investigation* (1927).[53] In all these books, as well as in the literally hundreds of articles he wrote on the subject, Robertson presents himself as an aggressive polemicist who is armed to the teeth with the widest possible knowledge of old and new literature alike, and will not budge an inch to allow his opponents some leeway. The rationalist cause was after all not served by displays of religious tolerance.

In the present discussion, we are not so much concerned with the details of Robertson's particular religious theories, as with his overall rationalist philosophy of life. Two books stand out among his works as attempts to provide a general account of his more general theoretical viewpoints. In 1902 Robertson published the first edition of his *Letters on Reasoning*, which he had 'planned to be read by my children when they are grown up'.[54] Not that Robertson toned down its strident rhetoric for the occasion: it is as fearless a piece of anti-religious polemics as any of his more openly controversial writings. In 1912 this book was followed by an 82-page pamphlet on *Rationalism*, which summarizes the rationalist doctrines already presented in *Letters on Reasoning*. As far as their philosophical ideas are concerned, neither book can make much of a claim to originality, but they provide instructive introductions to Robertson's system of values. I shall loosely follow the outline of *Rationalism* to provide a basic overview of some of Robertson's main ideas,

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[53] For contemporary criticism of Robertson's religious theories, see in particular F.C. Conybeare, *The Historical Christ or An Investigation of the Views of J.M. Robertson, Dr. A. Drews, and Prof. W.B. Smith* (Chicago, 1914); H.G. Wood, *Rationalism and Historical Criticism* (London, 1919); H.G. Wood, *Did Christ Really Live?* (London, 1938). More recently, G.A. Wells has attempted to assert the validity of Robertson's approach in *Did Jesus Exist?*, first pbd 1975 (London, 1986), and *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (London, 1982).

[54] *Letters on Reasoning* (London, 1935), p. xiii. The edition used here is the abbreviated edition which appeared as no. 50 in Watts's *Thinker's Library*. The first edition of *Letters on Reasoning* appeared in 1902, and was followed by a revised and expanded edition in 1905.

referring to *Letters on Reasoning* and various of his other books when necessary.

Terms and Definitions

In the first chapter of *Rationalism*,[55] Robertson is concerned with the choice of a proper term to cover his intellectual position. His decision in favour of 'rationalism' is grounded in the conviction that in the course of history, the term has always been applied to systems of thought tending to be inimical to religion. However, perhaps more interesting than this positive choice for 'rationalism' are his reasons for rejecting several other terms.

'Naturalism' is dismissed with some regrets. Although he does regard it as 'a highly convenient term for the view of things which rejects 'supernaturalism'' [4], he is mainly anxious to avoid any connection with thinkers who 'appear to formulate as a philosophic principle the doctrine that the best way to regulate our lives is to find out how the broad processus of 'Nature' is tending, and to conform to it alike our ideals and our practice.' [5] As we will see later, such a conception of naturalism was entirely alien to Robertson's interpretation of the law of evolution. That he certainly was a naturalist in philosophical terms will become clear as we follow the line of reasoning in *Rationalism*.

'Positivism' too is rejected, though more reluctantly, on the grounds of avoiding confusion with a group of differently–minded thinkers. The set of terms 'positive', 'positivist' and 'positivism' is characterized by Robertson as standing for '(1) the provable, (2) the attitude of the seeker for intelligible proof in all things, (3) the conviction that the rights of reason are ultimate and indefeasible.' [6] These empiricist tenets of testable truth, so typical of Victorian positivism, Robertson can wholeheartedly endorse. However, he is particularly concerned to avoid any confusion with Comtean Positivism, which, as a system, he considered 'incompatible with the positive spirit.' [6] Comte's Religion of Humanity, 'with Ideal Humanity in place of Deity, and his deceased friend Clotilde de Vaux as impersonating the Virgin Mother or Female Ideal'[56] smacked too much of Catholicism in disguise to be palatable to Robertson. In spite of Comte's ardent advocacy of the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of human life, Robertson regarded Comte's work as 'seriously anti–scientific, forbidding as it did the very lines of inquiry which were soon to build up a new evolutionary science'.[57] For Robertson, to whom

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[55] Page numbers referring to *Rationalism* are given in square brackets in the main text.

[56] *History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century*, I, p. 36.

[57] *Ibid.*

the discovery of evolutionary law was a pivotal moment in human history, this was damning criticism indeed. Although he had some praise for Comte's Law of the Three Stages, Robertson seems to have been unaware of the considerable ideological debt he and other rationalists owed Comte.

Rationalism and Progress: Buckle and Darwin

Having thus settled on 'rationalism' as a suitable compromise, in the second chapter Robertson then turns to the 'practical position' of the rationalist. Rationalism, he asserts, ultimately involves the substitution of private judgment for the reliance on authority, and it should be the rationalist's aim 'to seek by reflection a defensible theory of things rather than accept enrolment under traditional creeds which demand allegiance on supernaturalist grounds.' [8] One of the *Letters on Reasoning* is devoted to philosophical doubt as the beginning of wisdom (and, by implication, the end of religion). To Robertson, there is nothing cold or dark about doubt or rationalism in general. It is doubt which has enabled man to continue his progress towards civilization throughout the ages:

> As for man, every step he has made in civilisation has been taken in virtue of either doubt or the doubt-involving substitution of a new belief for an old; and every such step, depend on it, has been resisted by experienced people who denounced criticism as their type to-day denounces doubt and reason.[58]

Robertson is, of course, referring to the religionist, the theologian, who constantly abuses his authority by throwing it in the way of progress. From every page of *Rationalism*, it is apparent that Robertson is an unqualified believer in the possibilities of progress, a faith for which he mainly found legitimization in the work of Buckle and Darwin.

Critical to the core, Robertson was generally not given to displaying profuse signs of respect or admiration. However, there is one author of whom Robertson might almost be called a disciple: Henry Thomas Buckle. The debt owed to Buckle by Robertson is acknowledged by Kaczkowski, who even claims that many of Robertson's ideas are 'but extensions of theses expounded in the *Introduction to the History of Civilization in England*',[59] the work that made Buckle both famous and notorious. Its first volume was published in 1857, the second followed in 1861. These two volumes were part of a massive

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[58] *Letters on Reasoning*, p. 16.

[59] Conrad J. Kaczkowski, 'John Mackinnon Robertson: Freethinker and Radical', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2 vols (St. Louis University, 1964), I, p. 101.

undertaking, a history of civilization in England on a scientific basis, which Buckle never even came close to completing. He died in Damascus in 1862, aged forty, having suffered from ill health throughout his life.[60] Robertson had nothing but the highest praise for Buckle's personality and the depth of his learning, and he showed particular respect for the fact that, like himself, Buckle had never had any public school or university training. There is no doubt that Robertson felt great, and for him unusual, affinity towards Buckle, both on a personal and on an intellectual level. His *Buckle and his Critics*, though critical of Buckle in some points, is an acerbic vindication of Bucklean doctrine against charges from the side of critics such as Leslie Stephen and Theodore Parker.[61]

The central question Buckle asked was this: 'Are the actions of men, and therefore of societies, governed by fixed laws, or are they the result either of chance or of supernatural interference?'[62] His unhesitating choice for the first option shows him to be a believer in the law of universal causation, a follower of Comte and, in particular, Mill. His conception of the science of history is based on the determinist contention that it is possible to discover the fixed laws governing collective and individual human behaviour by applying the methods of the natural sciences to history. However, Buckle deviates from Mill by finding proof for this contention in statistics. He points to suicide, for instance, to show that although suicide seems entirely a matter of individual free will, the number of suicide cases remains remarkably constant from year to year. Free will, in other words, is a chimera; universal causation operates on man as on the rest of nature.

The rise of civilization is therefore also a causal process. Buckle is perhaps best known for his theory of the influence of climate on the rise of civilization, which led him to the conclusion that Britain was geographically uniquely positioned to enjoy rapid progress.[63] In Europe, but especially in Britain, the physical conditions of life had never stood in the way of progress, so that the real source of progress could do its work unimpeded. That source, the great uplifting factor in the course of history, Buckle held to be *knowledge*:

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[60] The standard Victorian biography of Buckle is A.H. Huth's *The Life and Writings of Henry Thomas Buckle*, 3rd ed., 4 vols (London, 1880). The most recent account of Buckle's life is Giles St Aubyn's *A Victorian Eminence* (London, 1958).

[61] *Buckle and his Critics. A Study in Sociology* (London, 1895). Robertson published a revised and annotated edition of Buckle's work in 1904.

[62] H.T. Buckle, *History of Civilization*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (London, 1871), I, p. 6.

[63] Peter J. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress. The Victorians and the Past* (London, 1989), p. 28.

> So that, in a great and comprehensive view, the changes in every civilized people are, in their aggregate, dependent solely on three things: first, on the amount of knowledge possessed by their ablest men; secondly, on the direction which that knowledge takes, that is to say, the sort of subjects to which it refers; thirdly, and above all, on the extent to which the knowledge is diffused, and the freedom with which it pervades all classes of society.[64]

This emphasis on intellectual activity as the basis of human progress, the belief that the steady diffusion of knowledge will eventually do away with social evil – which he believed in large measure to be upheld by the organized religions –, is essential to Robertson's conception of rationalism. It would not go too far to say that Robertson's entire *oeuvre* may be considered a monument to the view that the gradual extension of knowledge and reason will eventually lighten the burden of mankind. It seems fitting that the last book Robertson published in his lifetime was the revised and expanded edition of his *Courses of Study*, a huge bibliography intended to provide the novice student of rationalist thought with 'lines of guidance in a number of fields of non-professional study'.[65] That Robertson considered such study, of which his own writings too were the product, an essential part of the process of social reconstruction, is evident throughout his work.

The one addition to man's knowledge which Robertson considered the greatest turning-point in history was the discovery of the Law of Evolution by Darwin, 'of all the ideas which undid the hold of traditionary creed on the general intelligence of the modern world, the most widely potent'.[66] Robertson's acceptance of the theory of evolution was complete and, it should be added, remarkably uncritical. He was little concerned with the finer scientific points of Darwin's theory. Instead, he saw evolutionism as the final death-blow to the traditional religious creeds and as the all-encompassing scientific justification for the establishment of a naturalistic, progressionist 'creed of science':

> The 'creed of science' is and remains the conviction of invariable sequence without 'supernatural' interludes. The *knowledge* of the process is a matter of perpetual patient reconsideration, in which myriads of men play their part, modestly or otherwise, as so many insects, building a coral reef. And the definite establishment of this creed for all thoughtful minds as against the older religious creed

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[64] Buckle, *History of Civilization*, I, p. 162.

[65] *Courses of Study*, 3rd ed. (London, 1932), p. v.

[66] *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century*, II, p. 313.

> of 'Providence' is the total achievement of Freethought in the nineteenth century.[67]

So momentous was the discovery of evolution to Robertson that it led him to the conclusion that 'this changes everything.'[68] All the 'human sciences' now had to be re–thought in the light of evolutionary doctrine. Sociology, ethnology, anthropology and hierology, psychology, ethics: all these fields were to be revalued from the evolutionary perspective of natural selection and causal sequence. As we will see in subsequent chapters, literature and literary criticism were to prove no exception. In the separate discussions of the human sciences in Robertson's *History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century*,[69] Darwin himself is left mainly in the background. In fact, the influence of Buckle, who wrote before Darwin, is at all times very much in evidence, so that Darwin's main function seems often to consist in conferring scientific authority on theories already present in Buckle's work. Although Darwin's principle of natural selection stresses the *randomness* of variations occurring in nature, Robertson saw in Darwinian theory the justification of Buckle's theory of gradual progress through increased knowledge.

Robertson emphasized the gradualness of progress: evolution, not revolution. In this evolutionary process, genius may have its place as pioneering new ideas, but Robertson does not adhere to the Carlylean viewpoint according to which the rise of a great genius may radically change the course of history: 'Genius is but the pioneer; sequent reasoning supplements and corrects its error; and the 'general deed of man' slowly assimilates the truth.'[70] Progress remains a slow and natural process that may and even must be stimulated, but can never be forced. Translated into political terms, we here have the source of Robertson's opposition as a liberal to the revolutionary ideologies of Socialism and Marxism.

Rationalism Challenged: The Question of Morality

What challenges, then, does a rationalist, steeped in evolution and natural law, have to meet from the side of religion? After the above excursion, we may now turn to the third chapter in Robertson's *Rationalism*, in which he addresses that particular question. The main challenge, and one that every nineteenth–century unbeliever was obliged to grapple with, was that a decline in religious belief would inevitably lead to a disastrous decline in moral standards. Would moral

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[67] *Ibid.*, p. 330.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 333.
[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 313–89.
[70] *Ibid.*, p. 377.

perversity be let loose on the world if every man were to rely on his private judgment? Robertson is never more emphatic in his advocacy of reason than when he deals with this issue, a set piece for debates between theologians and rationalists. His initial answer is

> that undoubtedly the application of reason to moral issues incurs the risks of fallacy which beset all reasoning in science so-called; but that, on the other hand, every one of these risks attaches at least equally to all acceptance of 'authoritative' teaching. [14]

Rationalists may not be able to attain to a perfect system of morals yet, but there is no more unanimity about what is morally right among religious believers. And if the religionist further challenges the rationalist by accusing him of relying on the Kantian 'categorical imperative', then Robertson is quick to declare that Kant's principle is nothing but 'a form of self-deception'. [16] Robertson does not believe in the voice of conscience, in an innate sense of 'ought', so if the religionist charges him with, on the one hand, inducing immorality through advocating unbelief, or, on the other hand, simply doing as he likes by listening to some form of 'inner voice', Robertson can easily meet that charge:

> Religious morality, as finally ratified by the more thoughtful among religious men, is but the endorsement of 'natural morality'. There is not one social commandment, as distinguished from religious or ritualist dogma, that did not emerge as a prescription of the natural moral sense, primitive or otherwise – a supererogatory proof that the religious prescriptions are from the same source. [16]

Since nature operates in accordance with uniform laws, and observable nature is all that man can presume to know, it follows logically that both morality and religion have their origins in nature, as only history can show us. Much of Robertson's scholarly work was concerned with tracing morality and religion to their roots in primitive society, as in his *Short History of Morals* and *The Dynamics of Religion*.[71]

In ethics, Robertson was a strict utilitarian, who believed that morality had evolved as a result of the usefulness of 'right conduct' within primitive society. The ground rule of ethics, 'do as you would be done by' proved essential to the survival of primitive social life, inasmuch as

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[71] *A Short History of Morals* (London, 1920); *The Dynamics of Religion* (London, 1926).

> those groups in which a simple code of reciprocity, as distinct from mere self–defence against immediate aggression, was set up and inculcated by comparatively thoughtful individuals, would be so far more likely to leave progeny.[72]

In this way, Robertson denied that man, throughout his history, had ever benefited from relying on a supposed innate sense of moral righteousness, a spontaneous capacity for telling right from wrong. The evolution of morality was, is, and will always be a natural function of man's adaptation to his social situation. True utilitarianism is therefore exempt from charges of Gradgrindian egotism:

> . . . the utilitarian who says of a given line of action for men in general that it will promote *their* happiness, and who condemns another line of action on the score that it will worsen life all round, is applying the one test by which sane moral life in the mass is controllable and improvable.[73]

Naturally, such a view leaves no room for a conception of morality in which religion can play any possible role, religion being, in Robertsonian terms, finally no more than a mere irrational appeal to intuition.

As the origins of morality were in Robertson's view traceable to natural law and social structure, so were those of religion. He saw the rise of religion as nothing more than an attempt on the part of primitive man to reduce a seemingly hostile universe to human proportions:

> The Gods and Goddesses, in fact, are made out of man's needs and passions, his fancies and his blunders, his fears and his hopes; and it would be strange if he never made them, even the highest of them, from the nucleus of his reverent and affectionate retrospect of his own kind. Round his elders and his ancestors were formed his first and fundamental notions of right and duty and obedience. How then should he fail to bring at times his religious and his primary ethical ideals into combination?[74]

If the roots of religion are in man's primitive endeavour to interpret the universe, then it is clear that science is the exact opposite and perfect

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[72] *A Short History of Morals*, p. 49.

[73] J.M. Robertson, 'The Meaning of Utilitarianism', in *Spoken Essays* (London, 1925), p. 98.

[74] *Pagan Christs. Studies in Comparative Hierology* (London, 1911), p. 53.

replacement of religion, as Kaczkowski points out.[75] For Robertson, science does correctly what religion does wrongly and to the detriment of humanity's progress. The fact that religion has become institutionalized in powerful churches is the root of age–old evil:

> . . . the church is an instrument of a twofold demoralization, a 'two–handed engine' of retrogression. Primarily, it is an endowed machinery for the preservation of worn–out beliefs and disproved dogma, for the imposition of the dead hand of an ignorant past on the living present. . . . It is impossible to overrate the historic hindrance thus put upon the greatest human interests by organized religion: no rhetoric can do the truth justice.[76]

The rationalist clearly finds himself faced with a powerful opponent. However, we find there is moral comfort to be drawn from this underdog position:

> One can but add that, seeing that in terms of the case he began by unprofitably avowing an unpopular opinion, he is presumably, on the average, rather less likely to lie for gain than those who confessedly find the sheer fear of consequences a highly important consideration in their own plan of life, and who have at the same time the promise from their own code of plenary pardon for all sins on the simple condition of ultimate repentance. [20]

Samples of this kind of thinking, of deriving one's 'rightness' from being part of a repressed minority, are scattered everywhere throughout Robertson's work. It shows again how little room he leaves for any position between radical unbelief and straight orthodoxy.

Consistency, Science, and Tests of Truth

In chapter four Robertson, then, ostensibly sets out to defend rationalism against the challenge of the philosopher. However, the chapter deals in particular with the principle of *bias*. According to Robertson, the rationalist is gifted with a particular 'moral bias', a 'moral taste':

> He has a conception of goodness in virtue of which he finds 'revelation' frequently repellent and the popular 'God' a chimera; even as the believer finds them satisfactory because they are in

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[75] Kaczkowski, 'John Mackinnon Robertson: Freethinker and Radical', p. 21.

[76] *The Dynamics of Religion*, p. 244.

> part conformable to his moral and speculative bias, and he been brought up to pretermit judgment beyond those limits. [21]

This bias is partly innate, and partly it is acquired through training, and the rationalist's bias is such that he 'carries the processes of doubt, analysis, and judgment further than do persons of a different habit of mind'. [21] Both the believer and the rationalist frame their hypothesis about the state of things, but whereas the rationalist follows through his line of reasoning to the logical end, the believer habitually jumps to supernatural conclusions. He may be a reasoner when he starts off, but he cuts off the reasoning process where the rationalist goes on, motivated by his particular bias. The believer may therefore be charged with what is to Robertson a capital sin: inconsistency. As will become clear, it is consistency that is the true Robertsonian test of truth.

It is because of his alleged inconsistency that the agnostic in religion cannot meet with Robertson's approval. In fact, Robertson denies the existence of real agnosticism. The agnostic cannot help but share the rationalist bias for coherence and consistency, and therefore 'He does not in effect merely say, 'I do not know': he implicitly says 'You do not know' to the professor of non–natural knowledge.' [24] The agnostic, therefore, may *think* he is steering a middle course between belief and unbelief, but in actual practice he is enlisted in the rationalist army by sheer force of bias. Here too, Robertson shows his essential unwillingness to concede any middle ground between atheism and religion.

When finally in this chapter Robertson turns to the philosophical challenge of rationalism, it becomes clear that he is preparing for a major skirmish with one of his favourite enemies: A.J. Balfour, future prime–minister and author of *A Defence of Philosophic Doubt* (1879) and *The Foundations of Belief* (1894). Balfour's sceptical challenge of reason, revolving around the idea that there are no beliefs which are really and truly founded in reason, is dealt with at length by Robertson in chapters five ('The Sceptical Religious Challenge') and six ('The Meaning of Reason')

In chapter six, Robertson summarizes Balfour's sceptical views of reason:

> The point is that no belief whatever concerning life and death and morality and the process of nature can be justified by 'reason'; and that accordingly no religious belief whatever can be discredited on the score of being opposed to reason or 'unreasonable.' If not more reasonable than the most carefully tested or the most widely accepted belief in science, or the belief that the sun will rise or fire burn to–morrow, or that we shall all die, it is not less reasonable than they. Therefore, believe as your bias leads. [38]

Balfour's philosophical scepticism is well geared to arouse Robertson's polemical anger. It represents, from Robertson's point of view, the attempt to destroy the supremacy of reason by means of reason itself, and, at the same time, to smuggle in religion through the back door. If science cannot yield us tested truth, why should we then require from religion to do precisely that? It is not surprising that to Robertson, such a challenge should perhaps appear even more dangerous than what was commonly thrust at the rationalist from the side of orthodox religion.

It should also be noted that to Robertson, there is no real distinction between rationalism and science. Although Robertson's belief in science as the only method to achieve truth – and therefore in direct competition with religion – is fundamental to his conception of reason and rationalism, he never explicitly makes a statement to that effect in *Rationalism*. That a defender of reason and private judgment should use the methods of science as a weapon to destroy the believer's claim to authority is a premise Robertson feels no need to question, here nor anywhere else in his work.

Nor is he ever specific about what exactly constitute the methods of science. He clearly feels no need to define with any degree of accuracy what to him is so obviously clear. In the definitions he does provide, 'simply' and 'just' are the operative words:

> Scientific method is just careful, critical, reflective, tested and consistent method.[77]

> [Science is] but the application of a stricter common sense to a problem where common–sense has reached either a wrong or an insufficient solution.[78]

> [Science] is simply a convenient way of naming either what we believe to be systematized and verified knowledge, or the process by which such knowledge is brought to system and verification.[79]

Since for Robertson, science is primarily a matter of solid common sense, he shows himself far from intimidated by Balfour's attack on its validity. The philosophic sceptic, he asserts, logically overreaches himself.[80] If the truth–value of a scientific proposition is questionable since it has been achieved

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[77] J.M. Robertson, 'Criticism and Science', *North American Review*, 209 (1919), p. 693.

[78] *"Hamlet" Once More* (London, 1923), p. 17.

[79] J.M. Robertson, 'Inverted Sociology', in *Essays in Sociology*, 2 vols (London, 1904), I, p. 37.

[80] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

by reasoning, and reasoning can never achieve absolute certainty about anything, as Balfour held, then that conclusion has in itself been achieved by a process of reasoning, and should be subject to the same criticism. There is simply no getting away from reason: anyone trying to undermine its supremacy cannot avoid using reason himself. Therefore, any attack of rationalism on reasoned grounds is always a concession to the rationalist's point of view, whether that attack be made by the philosophical sceptic or the religionist.

The fact that science and reason cannot always lead to fully testable truth (after all, Robertson argues, we can only *infer* that the sun will rise again tomorrow from past evidence, there is no *absolute* certainty) does not diminish their epistemological value, since '*Reasoning* is our name for the process of comparing or stating 'reasons why' certain propositions or judgments should be believed or disbelieved, or certain acts done or not done.'[81] There is, of course, nothing very startling about such a definition. As Robertson himself admits, his definitions of reason and reasoning conform quite unsurprisingly to those found in dictionaries. They also imply that no human activity in the intellectual field can be exempt from reason, so the charge that reason disregards or underestimates the emotions is simply irrelevant: 'even the feelings are, as it were, part of the stuff of Reason'.[82] In *Letters on Reasoning* he similarly states (in the typical idiom of the hard–boiled rationalist):

> The phenomena or forces of emotion and imagination may as well as any other forces be subject–matter of logical propositions; and if, in any argument which claims to trace and explain a process of social or personal causation, the actual play of emotion and imagination in all such processes be overlooked, the argument is so far fallacious.[83]

By implication, the accusation that the reasoner must necessarily be blind to the emotive qualities of the arts is easily met. He gives his children the following ardent piece of advice:

> Never, I beg you, let yourselves be browbeaten by people who tell you that to cultivate your reason is to lose the faculty for enjoying poetry, music, or any other art. The truth lies the other way. Exercise of the reason may indeed raise you above some kinds of enjoyment that appealed to your untrained mind, but it will rather

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[81] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 45.
[83] *Letters on Reasoning*, p. 10.

> enlarge your faculty for enjoying greater art, by widening, so to speak, the range of vibrations of your feelings.[84]

This point will become of particular importance in the discussion of Robertson's views on the science of criticism in subsequent chapters.

In chapter 7 of *Rationalism*, Robertson looks at 'the test of truth' more closely. Again, his conclusions constitute what is basically an appeal to common sense:

> For the generality of instructed men, truth in secular affairs means not merely 'that which is trowed,' but (*a*) that which we have adequate 'reason' to trow, and (*b*) that of which our acceptance is consistent with our way of testing credences of any or all other kinds. The ultimate criterion of our beliefs, in short, is the consistency with which we hold them. [48]

Throughout his work, Robertson preaches this gospel of consistency with great persistence and missionary zeal. It is part and parcel of his views on the uniformity of nature, and lies at the core of his philosophy:

> . . . in order to reach a tenable and coherent philosophy of life and practice, there is needed an earnest and continuous effort after consistency as the final criterion of truth, an anxious regard for evidence, a steady watchfulness against the snares of prepossession and predilection.[85]

Nor was it a principle that he held with academic aloofness. He seems to have been genuinely troubled, if not annoyed, by displays of inconsistent thought, feeling that 'There is something disturbing to the moral sense in the spectacle of transformations ill–explained; something that troubles the intelligence in the sense of either apparent or felt inconsistency.'[86] Not surprisingly, Robertson feels that it is the religionist who is the main offender against the law of consistency. Although the religionist may reason, and may reason well, in all kinds of non–religious issues, when he attempts to come to terms with religion, he suddenly applies vastly different standards. In sum:

> . . . the case for rationalism as against the creeds is that they recognise no rational test for truth, and apply none. They are all, to say the least, grossly improbable in the light of the fullest human

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[84] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[85] *Modern Humanists*, p. 144.

[86] *The Meaning of Liberalism* (London, 1925), p. 4.

> knowledge; and the acceptance of them means either passive disregard of the principle of sufficient reason or the habitual employment of argument which upon any other kind of issue would be recognised by all competent men as at best utterly inadequate. [54–55]

It should be noted that to Robertson, the law of consistency is not one that applies solely to the intellectual life. There is an important moral dimension to consistency in thought, in the sense that 'Consistency in thought is the gist of right thinking, of good reasoning; and consistency in action is the gist of right conduct.'[87] The theoretical distinction Robertson draws here between thought and action is not one he tends to follow through. In general, one could say that Robertson believes the consistent reasoner to be morally superior to the inconsistent one, and with the latter he, of course, refers to the religionist. His goal is, as it were, to turn the tables on the believer, and to show that it is he who is prone to moral deviations rather than the consistent atheist. The principle of consistency, then, is to Robertson not so much a philosophical law within a particular system of thought, as it is one more method of showing the error of the believer's way.

Robertson rounds off his defence of rationalism (which is, as we may now conclude safely enough, to an equal extent an attack on religion) with a statement showing profound confidence in the progress of the spirit of rationalism:

> The time is for him [=the true rationalist] even in sight, as it were, when most men will recognise and live by that law [=the law of intellectual consistency]; and when that day comes there will be no more need to profess rationalism than to profess, as a creed, any of the daily reciprocities by which society subsists. [61]

Robertson's display of confidence in progress through reason may partly be seen as a corollary to his propagandistic aim: the rejection of religion. However, the confidence or belief in progress does genuinely belong to the core of Robertson's thought on man and his place in nature. Although the course of progress will not be (as it never has been) unobstructed, the rationalist bias, the insistence on private judgment and consistency in thought, will eventually come to prevail. When challenged, the rationalist may claim that his bias 'is the bias to perfection in the intellectual life as the bias to order and sympathy is the bias to perfection in the civil.' [61] Finally, Robertson can confidently conclude that the critical rationalist is entirely impervious to criticism from the side of

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[87] *Letters on Reasoning*, p. 5.

religious believers, and may even make a logically validated claim to moral superiority.

Conclusions

One conclusion that may justifiably be drawn on the basis of the above outline of Robertson's rationalist system of thought is that his contributions to contemporary philosophy were, to say the least, limited. Philosophy, the history of which he undeniably had at his fingertips, was to him mainly a means to an end, a weapon to be used in his and his fellow rationalists' struggle against religious oppression. To engage in philosophical speculation for the sake of speculation itself was never one of his ostensible goals.

Did Robertson ever even attempt to understand the human impulse towards religion? The following statement by William Irvine on T.H. Huxley's lack of insight into the human values of religion may with equal justice be applied to Robertson:

> That scientific freedom might be bought at some cost to the human spirit, that an absurd theory about the origin of the world could be a valuable repository of spiritual energy, that it could somehow be psychologically linked with the soundness of contemporary morals, Huxley was too optimistic to believe.[88]

Nowhere in Robertson's work, which spanned over fifty years, can he be caught displaying any sign of sympathy or respect for religion, and he never appears to have practised anything other than the consistency he preached. Not for him the signs of doubt that lie below the surface of the work of agnostics like Leslie Stephen or John Morley. In his *Modern Humanists* (1891) and *Modern Humanists Reconsidered* (1927), Victorian rationalist prophets like John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer are indignantly reprimanded for the theistic leanings Robertson detected in their work, and although there was an interval of over thirty years between the appearance of each book, Robertson's 'reconsiderations' certainly had no bearing on his anti–religious position. If anything, *Modern Humanists Reconsidered* is even more fiercely anti–theistic. As the heir of Bradlaugh's militant lower–class atheism, far more than of the respectable middle–class agnosticism debated in the Metaphysical Society, only the strictest rejection of religion could satisfy him.

It is an ironic fact that where the rationalist position in the 1870s and 1880s, Robertson's formative years, had mainly been one of defiant attack, in subsequent decades it was the dogmatic rationalist who found himself

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[88] Irvine, *Apes, Angels, and Victorians*, pp. 7–8.

increasingly forced into a mode of defence. In the first chapter we already saw how militant secularism went into gradual decline from the second half of the 1880s onwards. Partly, the movement was the victim of its own success, now that unbelievers were no longer prosecuted for blasphemy, professing atheists were allowed to enter parliament, and church attendance dropped to ever–lower rates.[89] However, not only organized secularism was losing ground: on the whole, rationalists saw an increasing number of critical challenges levelled at them.[90]

In *Rationalism*, as we saw, Robertson deals at length with the influential philosophical scepticism of A.J. Balfour, who attacked the unquestionable authority of science. An even more serious threat to science and the rationalist spirit Robertson felt to be posed by Benjamin Kidd's work on *Social Evolution*, published in 1894. Kidd put forward a powerful defence of Christianity, on the grounds that religion was

> a form of belief, providing an ultra–radical sanction for that large class of conduct in the individual where his interests and the interests of the social organism are antagonistic, and by which the former are rendered subordinate to the latter in the general interests of the evolution which the race is undergoing.[91]

In other words, rather than as a supernatural sanction on immoral behaviour, Kidd saw religion as a necessary lubricant in the evolution of society, transcending the fixed boundaries of scientific values. Only religion could overcome man's natural selfishness, standing in the way of social progress. For this view, as for any attempt at reconciliation between science and religion, Robertson expressed nothing but the deepest disdain.[92] The use of reason to discredit reason was to him a logical *non sequitur*, which he fervently denounced.

However, the tide of the times was more and more against him. Among the philosophers of the late–Victorian age who gave religious sensibility a place in the scientific world–view, William James was perhaps the most influential.

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[89] James R. Moore, 'Freethought, Secularism, Agnosticism: The Case of Charles Darwin', in *Religion in Victorian Britain. Vol. I: Traditions*, ed. Gerald Parsons (Manchester, 1988), p. 275.

[90] For an excellent concise account of the decline of rationalism, see the chapter 'Things Fall Apart: The Rationalist Press after the First World War', in Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, pp. 150–80.

[91] Benjamin Kidd, *Social Evolution* (London, 1894), p. 130. Quoted from Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, p. 154.

[92] For a vitriolic discussion of Kidd's work, see, for instance, Robertson's essay 'Inverted Sociology', in *Essays in Sociology*, I, pp. 36–64.

Robertson paid tribute to James's 'remarkable literary power',[93] but had little patience for James's emphasis on the importance of religion for man's emotional response to his existence. This need for a particular emotional and spiritual fulfilment was also strongly felt by a group of thinkers described by F.M. Turner in his book *Between Science and Religion. The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England*: Henry Sidgwick, James Ward, Alfred Russell Wallace, George John Romanes, Frederick W.H. Myers, and Samuel Butler. Although these men, working in different fields, accepted the general concepts and theories of science and renounced the doctrines of Christianity, they felt themselves constrained by the narrowly conceived dogmas of the creed of scientific naturalism. As the 'honest doubters' of the religion of science, they eventually looked beyond scientific naturalism and orthodox Christianity to, for instance, a non–Christian belief like spiritualism. In Britain, their efforts met with approval from writers like Edmund Gurney, Edward Carpenter, Walter Leaf, Oliver Lodge, George Bernard Shaw, and F.C.S. Schiller, while Ravaisson, Boutroux and Bergson were kindred spirits in France, as was Lotze in Germany.

While the world was changing around him, and scientific rationalism continued to lose ground, Robertson never conceded any territory. In the chapter on nineteenth–century and Edwardian rationalism in her book on *Varieties of Unbelief*, Susan Budd notes an element of *grimness* as part of the rationalist's mental make–up:

> There is an adulation of hard–headedness which is a corollary of the Victorian view of science as essentially a practical and material form of knowledge, the feeling that the harsh demands which nature and reality make of mankind must be faced with stern endeavour and an indomitable will.[94]

Even a cursory reading of *Rationalism* or *Letters on Reasoning* suffices to show that Robertson was indeed in many respects the very type of the hard–headed, hard–hitting rationalist. However, the automatic conclusion that he was therefore unable to sympathize with the demands of the emotional life, a logic–chopping machine incapable of aesthetic appreciation, is fully beside the point. Peter Allan Dale has shown that 'the break between romantic aestheticism and positivist science was far from radical',[95] that the critical dis-

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[93] *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century*, II, p. 549. In a footnote on that same page, Robertson voices the unorthodox opinion that William James' brother, the novelist Henry James, 'was singularly inferior in literary lucidity to his father and brother.'

[94] Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, p. 144.

[95] Dale, *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture*, p. 8.

courses of art and science were not so neatly and irrevocably compartmentalized. In the following chapter I will attempt to show in detail how Robertson's strict scientific rationalism (it is, in fact, hard to imagine a stricter adherence to the creed!) impinged on his approach to literature generally and to literary criticism in particular.

Chapter 3

Robertson and scientific literary criticism

Introduction

If it is true, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, that one of the dominant strains in Victorian intellectual life was the gradual extension of the methods of the natural sciences to all fields of human knowledge, then it should come as no surprise that eventually science was brought to bear upon the particularly elusive discipline of literary criticism. As early as 1761, Lord Kames, in his *Elements of Criticism*, had spoken of criticism as 'a rational science', 'a regular science, governed by just principles'.[1] Kames, however, as Robertson commented, did not have available to him the scientific methodology to justify his use of these terms, so that 'Kames throughout yields a musty odour, as of dry–rot, bodefully significant to those of us who follow his craft.'[2] But the great rise of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century, engendering such hope and enthusiasm for what science might eventually accomplish in all fields of human knowledge, inspired a far from negligible number of men of letters to turn their attention to the application of scientific principles to literary criticism. Considering J.M. Robertson's faith in scientific rationalism and profound interest in (indeed, love for) what he himself preferred to call *belles lettres*, it is not surprising to find him among these. Science, it seemed to Robertson and his fellow scientific critics, had opened vast possibilities to save criticism at last from the whims of subjective appreciation, and to set decisive and final standards for aesthetic judgment. If science seemed capable of solving the great riddle of the universe, why would it not be able to settle such a relatively minor issue as the principles of literary evaluation? After all, as Robertson noted in 1889, there appeared to be a general consensus that science had already effected great strides forward in morals, politics and economics, fields no less prone to the vagaries of

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[1] Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, first pbd 1762, 7th ed., 2 vols (London, 1787), I, p. 7. Quoted from *ETCM*, p. 18.

[2] *ETCM*, p. 19.

subjective interpretation.[3] Why should it then be impossible to found a science of literary criticism?

The second part of this chapter will be devoted to a detailed examination of J.M. Robertson's ideas and theories about scientific literary criticism. The aim there will be to establish exactly how Robertson saw the role of science in the critical evaluation of literary texts. In the first part, I will try and set the scene for this examination by presenting the views of a number of critics who shared Robertson's conviction that science and literary criticism could and indeed should go hand in hand.

Part 1: Victorian Scientific Criticism

Introduction

Although in the past few decades scholarship has succeeded in substantially adjusting the picture of the Victorian critical landscape as a vast, almost empty plain dominated by the mountainous presence of Matthew Arnold, most critics who expressed their faith in the importance of science for literary criticism have received scant attention. In his history of British and American criticism from 1750 to 1990, Patrick Parrinder, for instance, even goes so far as to state categorically that 'Victorian positivism did not address itself to the development of a science of criticism' and that the 'better-known mid-Victorian reviewers such as Bagehot, G.H. Lewes and R.H. Hutton were all opposed to the idea of criticism as science.'[4] Although it is certainly true that in the mid-Victorian period, scientific literary criticism was hardly at the forefront of the literary panorama, G.H. Lewes, at one stage in his career, decidedly *was* interested in the establishment of a critical science, and the mere fact of *opposition* suggests another side of the issue as well, as we shall see. By the 1880s, at the height of the scientific vogue, the critics which I shall present in this chapter saw the infusion of literary criticism with a sound dose of science as a fruitful and, indeed, a necessary undertaking, which they attempted to bring to the centre of the literary scene. According to Parrinder, Victorian positivism felt that literature eluded scientific codification because 'it was a medium of individual, idiosyncratic expression',[5] but the fact that literary criticism was and always had been such a subjective affair was precisely the

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[3] *ETCM*, p. iii.

[4] Patrick Parrinder, *Authors and Authority. English and American Criticism 1750–1990* (London, 1991), pp. 133–4.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 134.

reason why these critics of the second half of the nineteenth century concluded that here there was a tremendous task for science to work upon.

In short, Victorian positivism did quite emphatically address itself to the development of a science of criticism, especially in the last two decades of the century.

This is particularly apparent when we read those critics who noted with misgiving and sometimes even outright suspicion the changes that science seemed to be working in contemporary criticism. In an article on 'The Decay of Literature' for the *Cornhill Magazine*, Leslie Stephen observed how 'criticism has arrayed itself in some of the dignity of a science' and concluded that 'our judgments are more catholic – more scientific, if you like – and rest upon a much wider induction, and more minute examination of the facts.'[6] This was not, however, a development he could wholeheartedly applaud, adding

> And yet do we not miss something? If we are less narrow in our principles, are we not blunter in our perceptions? Have we not lost something of the fineness of tact which belonged to men trained in a fixed tradition? Criticism has become more scientific, but less delicate and less really sympathetic.[7]

Stephen's attitude to scientific criticism, or science in criticism, is characterized by a high degree of ambivalence. On the one hand he, as one of the most prominent positivist thinkers, was far from blind to the advantages a scientific approach could bring to the study of literature. In his essay on Charlotte Brontë he claims that 'though criticism cannot boast of being a science, it ought to aim at something like a scientific basis, or at least to proceed in a scientific spirit.'[8] On the other hand, he felt very deeply that the appreciation of literature was after all purely a matter of individual taste. This ambivalence is clearly expressed in a passage such as the following:

> So far, then, as the study of literature can be – I will not say made truly scientific, for it is idle to speak of science in relation to the vague and tentative judgments which alone are possible now, but – treated in a scientific spirit, that is, examined impartially and placed in due correlation with all the truths known to us, it is

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[6] Leslie Stephen, 'The Decay of Literature', *Cornhill Magazine*, 46 (1882), pp. 602–3.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 603.

[8] Leslie Stephen, 'Charlotte Brontë', *Hours in a Library*, new ed., 4 vols (London, 1907), III, p. 272.

> essential to understand in some degree the time as well as the man, because only through the time can we fully understand the man.[9]

Stephen never attempted a full exposition on the science of criticism himself, but the above passages indicate that the subject was clearly of considerable importance to him, demonstrating the overall impact ideas on scientific criticism had in this period.[10]

Stephen's ambivalent attitude towards literary criticism on a scientific basis was shared by the Irish critic Edward Dowden, who in 1889 observed in an article for the *Fortnightly Review* entitled 'Hopes and Fears for Literature' that 'In the literature of criticism the influence of science has brought loss and gain.' On the one hand, Dowden was willing to accept that criticism could not afford to ignore the scientific impulse:

> We cannot do things by halves. Literary research, like historical research, must be exact and thorough or it is of little worth. It has opened new regions and buried ages for our study; yes, and for our enjoyment. It has illuminated the past. It has widened our sympathies. It has substituted for that dogmatic criticism which pronounced imperious judgments a new natural history of poets and prose-writers. Our library has become a kind of museum, in which specimens of the various species are arranged and classified. What we had read any way for our pleasure we must now study in chronological sequence, so that we may observe and follow a development. We reconstruct our author's environment, we investigate his origins.[11]

On the other hand, he also stated a clear proviso with which Stephen would have found himself in full accord:

> . . . that we do not forget the end of study in the means, that we somehow and at some time get beyond the apparatus. . . . The student of chemistry may find as interesting a subject of analysis in a bottle of that claret which bears the venerable name of an

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[9] Leslie Stephen, 'The Study of English Literature', *Cornhill Magazine*, 8 n.s. (1887), p. 493.

[10] In his book *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture* (Wisconsin, 1989), Peter Allan Dale goes so far as to call Stephen 'the other great scientific critic of the Victorian period after [G.H.] Lewes.' (p. 192) However, in view of the fact that Stephen never wrote at any length on scientific *literary* criticism (with which this chapter is primarily concerned), and considering his own doubts on the subject, he is not given separate treatment here.

[11] Edward Dowden, 'Hopes and Fears for Literature', *Fortnightly Review*, 45 n.s. (1889), pp. 182–3.

> eminent and versatile statesman as in a bottle of the rarest vintage; but wine has other uses than that of affording a field for analysis. It rejoices the heart of man, and this quality of the juice of the grape deserves at least a certain degree of attention.[12]

With his plea for preserving the human, moral element in criticism, demonstrating for one thing that scientific criticism formed a serious topic of debate at the time, Dowden responded in particular to the scientifically inspired work of two French critics, Hippolyte Taine and Emile Hennequin, which we shall have occasion to discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

Like Stephen and Dowden, such a seminal critic as George Saintsbury (seminal, that is, in terms of the late–Victorian literary scene) could not ignore the rise of a new approach to criticism. In one of his rare moments of reflection on critical theory, Saintsbury commented with asperity on 'the notion, now warmly championed by some younger critics both at home and abroad, that criticism must be of all things "scientific"'.[13] The concept clearly held no attraction for this 'King of Critics' and conservative to the core:

> For my own part, I have gravely and strenuously endeavoured to ascertain from the writings both of foreign critics . . . and of their disciples at home, what 'scientific' criticism means. In no case have I been able to obtain any clear conception of its connotation in the mouths or minds of those who use the phrase. . . . Only I have perceived that when this 'scientific' criticism sticks closest to its own formulas and ways, it appears to me to be very bad criticism; and that when, as sometimes happens, it is good criticism, its ways and formulas are not perceptibly distinguishable from those of criticism which is not 'scientific.' For the rest, it is all but demonstrable that 'scientific' literary criticism is impossible, unless the word 'scientific' is to have its meaning very illegitimately altered.[14]

In an age when science seemed to be infringing on every walk of life, Saintsbury felt it necessary to stress the ultimate dichotomy between art and science, and the impossibility of capturing the individual's mind between the covers of a scientific manual:

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 183.

[13] George Saintsbury, 'The Kinds of Criticism', in *Essays in English Literature 1780–1860*, first pbd 1890, 3rd ed. (London, 1896), pp. xi.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. xi–xii.

> For the essential qualities of literature, as of all art, are communicated by the individual, they depend upon idiosyncrasy; and this makes science in any proper sense powerless. *She* can only deal with classes, only with general laws; and so long as these classes are constantly reduced to 'species of one,' and these laws are set at nought by incalculable and singular influences, she must be constantly baffled and find all her elaborate plant of formulas and generalisations useless. . . . To put the matter yet otherwise, the whole end, aim, and object of literature and the criticism of literature, as of all art, and the criticism of all art, is beauty and the enjoyment of beauty. With beauty science has absolutely nothing to do.[15]

Saintsbury was of course not the only critic who feared that science might completely overrun art. In his protestations against scientific criticism we hear the echoes of a wider debate on science *versus* literature in which the name of Matthew Arnold figures prominently. Roughly from *Literature and Dogma* of 1873 onwards we may witness Arnold attempting to set off his own concept of 'poetic truth' against that of the positivists' 'scientific truth'. In his lecture on 'Literature and Science', Arnold admits initially that 'in natural science the habit gained of dealing with fact is a most valuable discipline and that everyone should have some experience of it',[16] but he then goes on to a defence, on moral grounds, of humane letters over against science. The scientists, Arnold argues, may be able to provide us with new knowledge of our world, but

> still it will be *knowledge* only which they give us; knowledge not put for us into relation with our sense of conduct, our sense of beauty, and touched with emotion by being so put; not thus put for us, and therefore, to the majority of mankind, after a certain while, unsatisfying, wearying.[17]

If it should ever come to a choice between humane letters on the one hand and science on the other, mankind would do well to opt for an education in humane letters, since 'Letters will call out their being at more points, will make them live more.'[18] Although Arnold never appears to have responded directly to the attempts at scientific criticism discussed in this chapter, it is obvious that he would hardly have applauded them, and that his own powerful influence and

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[15] *Ibid.*, pp. xii–xiv.

[16] Matthew Arnold, 'Literature and Science', *Discourses in America*, first pbd 1885, (London, 1912), p. 99.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

that of his followers must have counted as an important check on further investigations in scientific criticism in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

However, this did not prevent the phrase 'science of criticism' from becoming so commonplace that by the 1890s it came to be taken somewhat for granted that criticism had indeed, in some way or other, been raised to the status of a science. One conspicuous example of this phenomenon is provided by the *New Review* of 1891, which contained a collection of three short articles headed 'The Science of Criticism'; the prominent authors were Henry James, Andrew Lang and Edmund Gosse.[19] Apart from the fact that James's piece shows an infinitely deeper understanding of the problems involved in literary judgment, one other thing is particularly striking: none of the articles so much as mentions the word 'science' or 'scientific'. They are, in fact, mostly made up of long invectives against the deplorable level of contemporary mass–reviewing. James's comments are especially sharp:

> The vulgarity, the crudity, the stupidity which this cherished combination of the offhand review and of our wonderful system of publicity have put into circulation on so vast a scale may be represented . . . as an unprecedented invention for darkening counsel. The bewildered spirit may ask itself, without speedy answer, What is the function in the life of man of such a reverberation of platitude and irrelevance? Such a spirit will wonder how the life of man survives it, and above all, what is much more important, how literature resists it; whether indeed literature does resist it and is not speedily going down beneath it.[20]

Both Lang and Gosse echo these statements in slightly different tones, but none of these three writers even attempts to set up a definition of a science of criticism as a weapon against the practice of sloppy mass–reviewing. The heading 'The Science of Criticism', possibly coined by the editor as a kind of 'eye–catcher', is simply left to suggest that effective criticism equals scientific criticism, which is what every critic should finally strive for. On the one hand this shows how familiar a term 'scientific criticism' had become: it was possible to use it without further explanation and would not strike any well–informed reader as anything out of the ordinary. On the other hand such a general use of the term indicates that it lacked definition and could, in fact, be

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[19] Henry James, Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, 'The Science of Criticism', *New Review*, 4 (1891), pp. 398–411.

[20] James, 'The Science of Criticism', p. 399.

made to mean any number of things, as long as it remained suggestive of the intention to improve the overall standard of criticism.

Indeed, if there is one thing that the critics whose work will be evaluated in the following sections have in common it is their concern with the raising of critical standards, however different their views on and approaches to these standards may have been. They turned to science in the genuine hope that it could do for literary criticism what it had already achieved in so many other fields: to afford at least a glimpse of 'first principles', of fundamental and indisputable truths on which future practitioners of the discipline might profitably base their work. With these high hopes for future progress, the search for a science of criticism seems no more than a natural and inevitable outgrowth of the overall positivist project, to which no critic was more whole-heartedly committed than J.M. Robertson.

It is not until the mid-Victorian period that we encounter the first two critics who, like Robertson, dedicated themselves to basing critical judgment on scientific principles: G.H. Lewes and E.S. Dallas. In order to provide a wider overview of how views on scientific criticism developed in Britain, it is then necessary to turn to France, where the idea of a science of criticism on naturalistic lines was much more strongly rooted than in the British Isles.[21] The great name here is that of Hippolyte Taine, whose ideas exerted a powerful influence on the British theoreticians of critical science in the last two decades of the century.[22] The work of two of Taine's followers, Ferdinand Brunetière and Emile Hennequin, which managed to attract attention from across the Channel, will also be discussed at some length. We then return to the British literary scene of the last two decades of the century, when the idea of a scientific criticism gained its widest currency in the wake of the general enthusiasm for scientific progress. The discussions of the theoretical work of H.M. Posnett, R.G. Moulton, and J.A. Symonds will be followed by some

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[21] See René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (London, 1963), p. 32. Wellek points out that the idea of a science of literature was particularly prominent in Germany, where the term 'Literaturwissenschaft' became quite common from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. However, since I confine myself to the British literary scene, on which German 'Literaturwissenschaft' – contrary to French thought on the subject – seems to have had little influence as far as science and criticism are concerned, I have not included German ideas in the present discussion.

[22] Taine's influence was not only strongly felt in Britain but also in America, where from the 1860s there was a vigorous critical movement dedicated to adapting the findings of the physical sciences to literary criticism so as to enable literature to be scientifically studied. See Harry Hayden Clark, 'The Influence of Science on American Literary Criticism, 1860–1910, Including the Vogue of Taine', *Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts and Letters Transactions*, 44 (1956), pp. 109–164.

general conclusions and observations on the phenomenon of Victorian scientific criticism.

G.H. Lewes's Principles of Success in Literature

George Henry Lewes's *Principles of Success in Literature* of 1865 is not the first theoretical discussion of scientific standards for literary criticism in the Victorian age.[23] Strictly speaking, that honour might perhaps be awarded more appropriately to E.S. Dallas's *Poetics: An Essay on Poetry*, which appeared as early as 1852. However, since that work was expanded and revised by Dallas into *The Gay Science* of 1866, to be discussed below, it does not seem unreasonable to let a discussion of Lewes's work precede that of Dallas. Also, quite apart from chronology, Lewes's *Principles of Success* makes a suitable starting-point for our present purposes, since it may serve to introduce a number of concepts and problems which continued to reverberate in many of the later attempts at a science of literary criticism.

The Principles of Success in Literature was originally published in instalments in the *Fortnightly Review*, which Lewes edited from 1865 to 1867, and of which he was also one of the co-founders; the first issue of the *Fortnightly* also saw the publication of the first chapter of the *Principles*.[24] Lewes announced his goals as both practical and theoretical in kind:

> I propose to treat of the Principles of Success in Literature, in the belief that if a clear recognition of the principles which underlie *all* successful writing could once be gained, it would be no inconsiderable help to many a young and thoughtful mind. . . . There is help to be gained from a clear understanding of the conditions of success; and encouragement to be gained from a reliance on the ultimate victory of true principles. [21]

In other words, Lewes's purpose was to provide guidelines for the young and uninitiated writer and critic which were to be based on sound scientific principles:

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[23] Page numbers referring to the American edition of *Principles* of 1891 by Fred N. Scott, which also has a useful introduction and notes, appear in square brackets in the main text.

[24] The standard biography of Lewes is Rosemary Ashton, *G.H. Lewes: a Life* (Oxford, 1991). For Lewes as a literary critic and thinker, see Alice R. Kaminsky, *George Henry Lewes as Literary Critic* (Syracuse, 1968); Hock Guan Tjoa, *George Henry Lewes: a Victorian Mind* (Cambridge MA, 1977).

> No man is made a discoverer by learning the principles of scientific Method; but only by those principles can discoveries be made; and if he has consciously mastered them, he will find them directing his researches and saving him from an immensity of fruitless labour. It is something in the nature of the Method of Literature that I propose to expound. Success is not an accident. All literature is founded upon psychological laws, and involves principles which are true for all peoples and for all times. These principles we are to consider here. [22]

Here, Lewes does not speak of a science of criticism *per se*, but it soon becomes apparent that the principles he seeks to establish are, by extension, also those of a scientific criticism. Lewes posits his primary test of merit in literature as that of 'success'. At first glance this may seem a curiously naive proposition, but what Lewes has in mind is not, in fact, success in the sense of popularity. He defines it more narrowly as 'the measure of the relation, temporary or enduring, which exists between a work and the public mind' [27], and when Lewes writes of the 'public mind', he refers as a matter of course to the kind of well–informed, intellectual readership the *Fortnightly Review* could command. True, enduring success is finally only achieved by works which 'while suiting the taste of the day, contain truths and beauty deeper than the opinions and tastes of the day, but even temporary success implies a certain temporary fitness.' [29]

It is possible to appreciate why 'success' should have appealed to Lewes as a test of literary merit. It has the attraction of seeming to offer an empirical, scientific standard for literary evaluation. However, the validity of such a criterion ultimately depends upon the strictness of its definition, and it is here that Lewes fails to convince. He proceeds to group the principles which govern literary success under three heads: the Principle of Vision (which takes an intellectual form), the Principle of Sincerity (which takes a moral form), and the Principle of Beauty (which takes an aesthetic form):

> Unless a writer has what, for the sake of brevity, I have called Vision, enabling him to see clearly the facts or ideas, the objects or relations, which he places before us for our own instruction, his work must obviously be defective. He must see clearly if we are to see clearly. Unless a writer has Sincerity, urging him to place before us what he sees and believes as he sees and believes it, the defective earnestness of his presentation will cause an imperfect sympathy in us. He must believe what he says, or we shall not believe it. . . . Finally, unless the writer has grace – the principle of beauty I have named it – enabling him to give some aesthetic charm to his presentation, were it only the charm of well–arranged

> material, and well-constructed sentences, a charm sensible through all the intricacies of *composition* and of *style*, he will not do justice to his powers, and will either fail to make his work acceptable, or will very seriously limit its success. [35–36]

It is in his discussion of these three principles that Lewes fails to transcend the level of commonsensical injunctions to inexperienced writers. Lewes does, however, introduce his treatment of the Principle of Beauty with some show of scientific invention and objectivity:

> The Principle of Beauty is only another name for Style, which is an art, incommunicable as are all other arts, but like them subordinated to laws founded on psychological conditions. The Laws constitute the Philosophy of Criticism; and I shall have to ask the reader's indulgence if for the first time I attempt to expound them scientifically in the chapter to which the present is only an introduction. [110]

On the same note he states elsewhere that 'our inquiry is scientific, not empirical; it therefore seeks the psychological basis for every law, endeavouring to ascertain what condition of a reader's receptivity determines the law.' The five psychological laws into which Lewes then subdivides the conditions of style are those of Economy, Simplicity, Sequence, Climax, and Variety. However, Lewes's appeal to scientific psychology is largely a rhetorical gesture, since his formulation of the five laws of style does not rise above mere common sense, and sometimes not even above the platitudinous: Economy 'rejects whatever is superfluous' [133], Simplicity is 'using the simplest means to secure the fullest effect' [134], Sequence 'gives strength by giving clearness and beauty of rhythm' [150], etc. In spite of Lewes's professions of scientific intent, what he provides is basically a practical beginner's guide to 'writing well', rather than a theoretical treatise on the psychological laws governing style and composition.

The chapter on the principle of sincerity leaves no doubt as to what Lewes's primary concern really is: morality in literature. His plea for sincerity in literature shows that he has learned the moral lessons of the prophets of his day, especially Arnold and Ruskin, well:

> Nothing but what is true, or is held to be true, can succeed; anything which looks like insincerity is condemned. In this respect we may compare it with the maxim of Honesty the best policy. No far-reaching intellect fails to perceive that if all men were uniformly upright and truthful, Life would be more victorious, and Literature more noble. [86–87]

Lewes makes no attempt at a scientific definition of sincerity, he confines himself mainly to earnest and occasionally even passionate injunctions directed at 'the young and strong'. Although the chapter on sincerity is the shortest of the book, it is here that the centre of gravity of Lewes's critical ideology lies.

The chapter, however, in which Lewes's scientific pretensions are most clearly in evidence, is that on the principle of Vision. Lewes's demand that a writer should 'look for himself and tell truly what he sees' is again expressive of his primarily moral concern, and cannot fail to remind us of Arnold's 'seeing the object as in itself it really is'. However, Lewes also offers a formal exposition on what constitutes the principle of Vision, in which he equates vision with imagination and proposes to deal with the place of the imagination in literary creation. Lewes defines imagination as 'the power of forming images; it reinstates, in a visible group, those objects which are invisible, either from absence or from imperfection of our senses.' [65] His thoughts on imagination are embedded in his theories of human cognition, of which the roots are to be found in his *Biographical History of Philosophy*, and which were further elaborated upon in his later *Study of Psychology* and *Mind as a Function of the Organism*. The gist of his theory here is that the mind of the true, 'successful' artist has an unusual capacity for turning sense impressions into concrete images, whereas the less artistically gifted mortal tends to assimilate these impressions as mere abstractions:

> Their [the poets'] vision is keener than that of other men. However rapid and remote their flight of thought, it is a succession of images, not of abstractions. The details which give significance, and which by us are seen vaguely as through a vanishing mist, are by them seen in sharp outlines. The image which to us is a mere suggestion, is to them almost as vivid as the object. [46]

However much his ideas are couched in terms taken from association psychology, Lewes finally seems to leave us with the traditional Romantic ideal of the poet as visionary, as seer. A visionary, it should be added, who should not close his eyes to the realities of the world which surrounds him: 'A poetical mind sees noble and affecting suggestions in details which the prosaic mind will interpret prosaically.' [82] Elsewhere, Lewes puts it in more prosaic terms when he calls attention to the fact that 'fairies and demons, remote as they are from experience, are not created by a more vigorous effort of imagination than milkmaids and poachers.' [69] With this in mind, it is not surprising that Lewes

should have become the first English exponent of realism in the novel, as Wellek has noted.[25]

One may conclude that, whatever its merits in other respects (Lewes's prose can be admirably elegant and lucid), as a scientific or theoretical treatise on the standards for literature and literary criticism, *Principles of Success in Literature* fails to offer much beyond the rather hazy principle of success as a pseudo–empirical test of literary merit. It is finally Lewes's moral earnestness which leaves the strongest impression on the reader, while the scientific terminology of his theory of the imagination seems dated and hardly central to the issues at hand. As a case study in the problems involved in establishing a science of criticism, however, the book remains instructive. It shows clearly the difficulties of finding empirical tests for literary merit, as well as a beginning awareness of the role psychology might play in such an endeavour. To the role of psychology we shall return presently in discussing the work of E.S. Dallas.

E.S. Dallas and The Gay Science

Literary history has on the whole been considerably kinder to G.H. Lewes than to Eneas Sweetland Dallas, who, for one thing, did not have the benefit of a close personal connection with one of the greatest writers of the age. However, although now quite obscure, Dallas was by no means a negligible figure in his own time, as even a brief outline of his biography will show.[26] Born in Jamaica in 1828, Dallas studied philosophy at Edinburgh University under William Hamilton, although he never took his degree. Having embarked upon a career in journalism, he moved to London in 1855 and joined John T. Delane's staff on *The Times*, to which he was for many years a leading contributor. It was Dallas who wrote the *Times* reviews of such epoch–making works as *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Great Expectations*, *Romola* and *Felix Holt*. Indicative of Dallas's status in the London literary world of the late 1850s and 60s are, for example, George Eliot's words on the reception of *Adam Bede*: 'the best news from London hitherto is that Mr Dallas is an enthusiastic admirer of Adam'.[27] Dallas did not limit himself to literature, nor did he write solely for *The Times*: he contributed regularly on biographical, political, cultural and other subjects to the *Daily News*, *Saturday Review*, and *Pall Mall Gazette*. A man of many talents and interests, Dallas even wrote on cookery

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[25] René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750–1950. Volume 4: The Later 19th Century* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 150.

[26] The following biographical details are taken from John Valdimir Price's introduction to the modern reprint of *Poetics: An Essay on Poetry* (London, 1995).

[27] Quoted from Jenny Taylor, 'The Gay Science: The 'Hidden Soul' of Victorian Criticism', *Literature and History*, 10 (1984), p. 191.

and gastronomy, and it is his much reprinted *Kettner's Book of the Table, a Manual of Cookery*, first published two years before his death in 1879, which was his most successful work.[28] His works of literary–critical theory *Poetics: An Essay in Poetry* (London 1852), and *The Gay Science* (2 vols., London, 1866),[29] the continuation and expansion of *Poetics* which is the subject of this section, could boast of no such popularity: they were almost entirely disregarded by his contemporaries.[30]

In the preface to *The Gay Science*, Dallas announces his main objective as 'an attempt to settle the first principles of Criticism, and to show how alone it can be raised to the dignity of a science.'[31] [V] Dallas's use of the word 'dignity' is significant here: science is presented as having a kind of established status which criticism, in its present disorganized state, cannot yet hope to achieve. Like most attempts at scientific criticism, Dallas's enterprise is motivated by his sense of disorder in contemporary criticism, a crisis which only rigorous systematization could dispel. In his *Poetics* of 1852, Dallas had already written that 'We have critical opinions in great abundance, and often of great value, but we have no critical system. The critics feel their way, do not see it; we walk by faith, not by sight; our judgments too often show instinct without understanding.'[32]

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[28] A modern reprint of *Kettner's Book of the Table* was published in London in 1968 by Centaur, with an introduction by Derek Hudson.

[29] In *The Gay Science*, Dallas announces his intention to publish another two volumes, but he died without completing them, possibly because he was discouraged by the lack of appreciation the work had received. Also, as a busy journalist, he may simply have lacked the time required for such an ambitious enterprise.

[30] Both works, however, have not entirely escaped twentieth–century scholarly notice. *Poetics* was reprinted with a very informative introduction by John Valdimir Price in 1995. For an extensive discussion of *Poetics*, see Alba H. Warren Jr., *English Poetic Theory 1825–1865* (Princeton, 1950), pp. 126–51. George Saintsbury was the first to discuss *The Gay Science* at some length in volume three of his *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, first pbd 1900–04, 5th ed. (London, 1929), pp. 511–13. John Drinkwater quotes extensively from *The Gay Science* in his chapter on Dallas in *The Eighteen-Sixties* (Cambridge, 1932), pp. 201–23. A summary of Dallas's main critical ideas may be found in Michael Robarts, 'The Dream and the Poet. A Victorian Psycho–Analyst', *TLS* (January 1936), p. 42. René Wellek has edited, and written an introduction for, the reprint of *The Gay Science* (New York, 1966); there is a chapter on Dallas in his *History of Modern Criticism. Volume 4: The Later 19th Century*. A substantial account of *The Gay Science* also appears in Jerome Buckley, *The Victorian Temper. A Study of Literary Culture* (London, 1966). However, the two most extensive works on Dallas are both unpublished Ph.D. theses: Francis X. Roellinger, 'E.S. Dallas, A Study in Victorian Criticism' (University of Michigan, 1938), and Ian Carruthers, 'E.S. Dallas as a Reviewer of Contemporary Literature' (University of London, 1970).

[31] Page numbers referring to *The Gay Science* (London, 1866) are given in square brackets in the main text.

[32] *Poetics* (London, 1995), p. 3.

In Dallas's view, a scientific critical system was, although difficult, far from impossible to achieve, but the establishment of such a system ultimately depended on the insight that 'it must of necessity be the science of the laws of pleasure, the joy science, the Gay science.' [6] Dallas argued that 'a science of criticism, embracing poetry and the fine arts, is possible only on the supposition that these arts all stand on common ground; and that, however, varied may be the methods employed in them, their inner meaning and purpose is the same.' [76] What, then, is this 'common ground' which unites all the arts? Dallas's conclusion is that 'it is admitted that the immediate end of art is to give pleasure' and that 'if this be granted, and it is all but universally granted, it entails the inevitable inference that criticism is the science of the laws and conditions under which pleasure is produced.' [91]

Dallas saw the general disregard of the mental sciences as an immediate obstacle in the way of the establishment of such a 'science of pleasure'. He felt that the immense successes of the physical sciences had generated a kind of one–sided devotion which was greatly to the detriment of the mental sciences. G.H. Lewes's *Biographical History of Philosophy*, for instance, was 'burdened with the fallacy that because what is called metaphysics is impossible, therefore any attempt at a science of the mind must be vain.' [55] A science of the mind, however, was exactly what was needed as a foundation for a science of criticism: 'In point of fact, the great fault of criticism is its ignorance – at least its disregard of psychology.' [57] That such a science cannot claim the same level of exactitude as, say, mathematics, is no reason not to pursue it. After all, not all the sciences could be equally exact, and 'why then should a critical science, if there is ever to be one, do more than all the other sciences in leading its disciples into a land free from doubt?' [63] In the end, Dallas concluded, 'system is science', and it is systematization that every science should finally strive for. [59]

The science of criticism, then, was to be achieved through the application of a systematized science of mind which was to concentrate on the imagination 'as the fountain of art' if we, as Dallas had argued, 'accept art also as essentially a joy, for imagination is the great faculty of human joyance.' [171] Dallas sees a profound understanding of the imagination as imperative to the establishment of a science of criticism: 'This power of imagination is so vast and thaumaturgic that it is impossible to lift a hand or move a step in criticism without coming to terms with it, and understanding distinctly what it is and what it does.' [170] What Dallas subsequently sets out to provide is, ambitiously enough, 'the first and only attempt to give an exhaustive analysis of imagination'. [173]

Dallas does not see the imagination as a special faculty separate from the regular workings of the mind, but rather as a special function of the mind: 'It is a name given to the automatic action of the mind or any of its faculties – to

what may not unfitly be called the Hidden Soul.' [194] Dallas's definition of the 'hidden soul' at the opening of the chapter with that title has remarkably modern overtones:

> The object of this chapter is not so much to identify imagination with what may be called the hidden soul, as to show that there is a mental existence within us which may be so called – a secret flow of thought which is not less energetic than the conscious flow, an absent mind which haunts us like a ghost or a dream and is an essential part of our lives. [199]

It is, in fact, from this 'secret flow of thought', this 'hidden soul' which harbours the imagination, that artistic creation originates. But not only is the unconscious or subconscious the source of art, it is also the explanation of its appeal and the measure of its worth: 'Art is poetical in proportion as it has this power of appealing to what I may call the absent mind, as distinct from the present mind, on which falls the great glare of consciousness, and to which alone science appeals.' [316] It is the subconscious which is the seat of the creation and appreciation of art, whereas it is the conscious which is the province of reason and science. Therefore it is the analysis of the unconscious which provides the foundation for a science of criticism.

Dallas's theories of the unconscious might lead to the attractive conclusion that he anticipated Freud by a good many years. However, as Jenny Taylor has pointed out, Dallas does not point to certain cornerstones of Freud's theory, such as his conception of sexual repression, nor – and this is probably even more important – was the 'unconscious' a concept that sprang into being with Freud for the first time.[33] Dallas himself notes that 'It is but recently that the existence of hidden or unconscious thought has been accepted as fact in any system of philosophy which is not mystical', indicating that he is fully aware of the currency of the concept. [201]

Rather than as a theoretician of psychology and a precursor of Freud, it is as an innovator and systematizer of literary criticism that we should assess Dallas. If we look at such assessments in the past, it is remarkable that it should be George Saintsbury, so staunchly opposed to any theoretical approach of criticism and literature throughout his career, who was the first Victorian critic of note to have praise for Dallas's scheme:

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[33] Taylor, 'The Gay Science: The 'Hidden Soul' of Victorian Criticism', p. 197. On Dallas and psycho–analysis, see also Thomas C. Caramagno, 'The Psychoanalytic Aesthetics of Eneas Sweetland Dallas', *Literature and Psychology*, 33 (1987), pp. 21–31.

> I must admit that, having been disgusted at the time of the appearance of *The Gay Science* by what I then thought its extremely silly, and now think its by no means judicious, title, I never read it until quite recently, and then found (of course) that Mr Dallas had said several of my things before me, though usually with a difference.[34]

However, Saintsbury's praise remained far from unqualified, and his main objection to Dallas's proposal for a science of criticism was that he failed to see how Dallas could ever direct it 'to that actual criticism of actual literature', a question which every scheme of scientific criticism would ultimately have to answer.[35]

Of more recent date is René Wellek's verdict that Dallas in fact erected 'a Victorian style Crazy Castle, a thing of rags and patches that cannot come to life again and remains a curiosity of the time.'[36] It is certainly true that Dallas, in spite of his obvious erudition and wit, failed to furnish the well–organized system of criticism on scientific principles he aspired after. However, his attempt is much more ambitious than Lewes's, and Dallas manages to touch on far more issues relevant to the question. We may at this point quote R.A. Forsythe, who felt that Dallas's critical awareness of the problems of literary criticism 'deserved wider acclaim, not only for its insight, but also because of the novel "remedy" he suggested. For it was his contention that the crisis was one both of intelligence and taste, and that science, the main causative factor, would prove to be the only effective curative one as well.'[37] While Lewes started from the *a priori* assumption that success was the decisive criterion in literary criticism, Dallas went much further in attempting to unravel the processes which underlie artistic creation and the critical judgment of it. Although inevitably the product of an age in which a science of psychology was itself only beginning to emerge, Dallas's psychology of the unconscious may at least be credited with having pointed the theory of literary criticism in the direction of an important instrument for future investigation.

Hippolyte Taine

No critic has done more to give wide currency to the idea of a scientific literary criticism than Hippolyte Taine. In order to place in perspective the various

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[34] Saintsbury, *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, III, p. 511.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 513.

[36] Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism. Volume 4: The Later 19th Century*, p. 149.

[37] R.A. Forsythe, 'The Poetic Theory of E.S. Dallas', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 3 (1963), p. 336.

attempts at such a criticism in the final decades of the Victorian age in England, we must therefore now turn to France. Taine's theory of literature, which reached England mainly through his *History of English Literature*,[38] appeared to open doors which critics like Lewes and Dallas had been struggling to unlock. They too had turned to the findings of the relatively new disciplines of psychology and sociology as buildingstones for a new science of criticism, but their efforts had lacked system and coherence and, what was worse, had failed to come to terms with the problem of the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment. Success and pleasure did not, as they had hoped, furnish the rock–solid criteria by which all literature could be judged objectively. Taine, however, offered a scientifically inspired approach to literary criticism and literature in general which seemed to make it possible to avoid the problem of value–judgment altogether.[39] As a philosopher with a strong positivist bias, Taine was fundamentally interested in the observation of the workings of the law of cause and effect. In his *Philosophie de l'Art*, Taine indicates how he sees the difference between the old, subjective method and the new, supposedly objective approach to literature:

> The old esthetics gave first the definition of the beautiful, saying, for instance, that the beautiful is the expression of the moral ideal, or that the beautiful is the expression of the invisible, or better, that the beautiful is the expression of human passion; then, taking one of these definitions as a code article, it absolved, condemned, admonished, and guided . . . The modern method which I try to follow, and which begins to be applied in all moral sciences, consists in thinking of human works and particularly works of art as facts, products of which one must point out the characteristics and seek the causes – nothing more. Science thus understood does not proscribe or forgive; it observes and explains.[40]

In the 'old method' Taine describes here we can still plainly recognize the critical practice of Lewes and Dallas, in spite of their scientific pretensions. It is never their intention to limit themselves merely to describing literary

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[38] Hippolyte Taine, *History of English Literature*, trans. H. van Laun, 4 vols (London, 1907). The page numbers inserted in square brackets in the main text refer to volume one of this edition.

[39] There is a vast amount of literature on Taine, but a penetrating introduction to Taine's scientific and aesthetic theories is provided by Sholom J. Kahn, *Science and Aesthetic Judgment. A Study in Taine's Critical Method* (London, 1953). For Taine as a scientific critic, see also Jean–Thomas Nordmann, *Taine et la Critique Scientifique* (Paris, 1992).

[40] Quoted from Giovanni Gullace, *Taine and Brunetière on Criticism*, (Lawrence, 1982), p. 81.

phenomena. In the end, scientific literary criticism is still for them a matter of creating prescriptive rules rather than deducing descriptive laws. This naturally begs the question: did Taine's critical theory enable him to stay clear of the primacy of value judgment?

The *locus classicus* for answering this question is Taine's introduction – as notorious as it is famous – to the *History of English Literature*. Here, Taine does indeed proposé to deal with literature as so many scientific data, detached as much as possible from personal appreciation. To Taine, the work of literature appears to be not so much an end in itself, as the means to discover what, or rather who, is behind the literary artefact. In his own words: 'So you study the document only to know the man.' [2] Literary criticism thus becomes a scientific tool which may be used to investigate the psychology of its creator.

This does not, however, lead Taine in the direction of a primarily biographical approach to literature, as adopted by his great master Sainte–Beuve. His observance of the laws of cause and effect makes Taine go much further. If the literary work unveils the psychological make–up of its creator, by what then is this psychology in its turn determined? The principle of universal causality determined for Taine that 'every complex phenomenon arises from other more simple phenomena on which it hangs', which led him to the much–debated conclusion that 'vice and virtue are products, like vitriol and sugar.' [11] It is important to note here that Taine does not argue that vice and virtue are in any way *like* vitriol and sugar. His point is rather that there is 'a system in human sentiments and ideas: and this system has for its motive power certain general traits, certain characteristics of the intellect and the heart common to men of one race, age, or country.' [13]

Taine then famously postulates *race*, *surroundings*, and *epoch* (*race, milieu, moment*) as the three main determinants of these 'characteristics of the intellect and the heart'. [13] It is this triad which has become the catchphrase by which Taine is widely known, and it is hardly necessary to reiterate the familiar refutations of the scheme: the dubious overtones of the concept of race in the light of 20th–century history, the indeterminacy of the definitions of *milieu* and *moment*, etc. However, it is relevant to emphasize Taine's overall adherence to the principle of universal causality:

> So much we can say with confidence, that the unknown creations towards which the current of the centuries conducts us, will be raised up and regulated altogether by the three primordial forces; that if these forces could be measured and computed, we might deduce from them as from a formula the characteristics of future generations. [24–25]

In such a seemingly rigid system, the place of literature would appear a very limited one. Taine believed, at least in principle, that literature could provide the key to the working of the three 'primordial forces' in history: 'It is then chiefly by the study of literature that one may construct a moral history, and advance toward the knowledge of psychological laws, from which events spring.' [35] This could perhaps lead one to expect, viewed from our modern perspective, that Taine would be as interested in mediocre literature as documents of social history as in the acknowledged classics. As a matter of fact, this is hardly the case. Taine saw literature as the quintessence of a nation's history, a quintessence that could only be expressed by the best a nation had produced. It is at this point that we become aware how far removed Taine really was from a critical perspective which views literature as an object of research *per se*. There is no avoiding the conclusion that value–judgment of an intensely personal kind finally lies at the core of Taine's system. It is, after all, the critic who decides which works of art are most representative of a nation's development, which is evident throughout the *History of Literature in England.* At the same time, Taine's conclusions regarding national character arrived at on the basis of these subjectively selected masterpieces tend to reiterate familiar commonplaces, a fact which did not escape Leslie Stephen in his review of Taine's book for the *Fortnightly Review*.[41] Stephen, although in substantial agreement with Taine that 'we ought to study the organism in connection with the medium', takes him to task over the triteness of his depiction of English national character:

> Hogarth, in one of his pictures, represents the jovial Englishman confronted by the wretched frog–eaters at Calais; and M. Taine gives us the frog–eaters' view of the contrast. We are large, overfed, beer, port wine, and gin swilling animals; coarse, burly, and pachydermatous, with little external sensibility, and no love for things of the intellect; but yet with strong passions which sometimes express themselves in broad humour, and sometimes give birth to a rich but overcharged poetry. All this, however, which sometimes verges upon caricature, is no more than we have heard before. It does not require a philosopher, with theories about race, climate, and epoch, to tell us as much. . . . M. Taine's criticism is thus apt to become superficial.[42]

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[41] Leslie Stephen, 'Taine's History of English Literature', *Fortnightly Review*, 14 n.s. (1872), pp. 693–714.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 700.

In contrast, the fact that Taine still found himself entangled in the web of personal taste and judgment gave him at least some credit with such an arch–conservative and largely anti–theoretical critic as George Saintsbury:

> Hippolyte Taine was a critic, although too often (not always) a 'black horseman' of criticism. He was a great aesthetician, he was a brilliant literary historian – that is to say, what should be a critic on the greatest scale.[43]

This praise did not, however, make Saintsbury's final condemnation of Taine's theoretical approach to literature any less severe:

> Taine is, therefore, the capital example of the harm which may be done by what is called 'philosophy' in criticism. If he had resisted this tendency, and had allowed himself simply to receive and assimilate the facts, he might have been one of the greatest critics of the world.[44]

Although Taine may not have been successful in solving the problem of aesthetic judgment within the context of a scientific approach to literature, his use of sociology, history and psychology as tools for literary–critical research provided the starting–point for a number of notable endeavours in scientific literary criticism, in France as well as in England. One of Taine's greatest followers in France was Ferdinand Brunetière.

Ferdinand Brunetière

The name of Ferdinand Brunetière now has a considerably less familiar ring than that of Taine, whom Brunetière followed in his efforts to bring science to literary criticism. Nevertheless, Brunetière's position was a particularly powerful one in his lifetime: from 1893 to 1906 he was editor–in–chief of the authoritative *Revue des Deux Mondes*, he was the foremost professor at the *Ecole Normale* from 1886 to 1900, and he became a member of the French Academy in 1893. From these highly influential platforms, Brunetière made a stand against wide–spread subjectivism and individualism by attempting to close the gap between literature and science.[45] It was not an attempt that caused

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[43] Saintsbury, *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, III, p. 440.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 441.

[45] For a useful introduction to Brunetière's life and work, as well as to Taine's influence on Brunetière, see Gullace, *Taine and Brunetière on Criticism.* A more in–depth treatment of Brunetière's work is provided by Elton Hocking, *Ferdinand Brunetière. The Evolution of a Critic* (Madison, 1936).

many ripples across the channel, but Brunetière's critical theory is relevant in the present discussion for its endeavour to base a science of criticism on Darwinian evolutionary theory.

Although Brunetière was essentially in agreement with Taine as to the necessity of bringing the rigorous systematization of science to literary criticism, he found the framework in which Taine had attempted to capture literary history too restrictive. Taine's theories, which – at least in principle – approached the work of art as constituting so many scientific data, had not sufficiently taken into account the individual human element in literature and literary criticism, and it was in order to fill this deficiency that Brunetière, perhaps surprisingly, turned to Darwin:

> When faced with human works we cannot refrain from approving or rejecting, from loving, admiring, or feeling repulsion. What is the cause of this admiration? This is one more question that Taine neglected to answer, or rather, attempted to answer in his lessons on art, but without success. It is at this point that I read and re–read Darwin. He, too, was triumphant at that time, after being subjected to much opposition. Thanks to him, a new biology was rising on the ruins of the old. As I accepted in principle the similarity between literary history and natural history, I decided to carry this principle to its limit, and, if possible, to introduce the theory of evolution into literary criticism.[46]

The analogy between literary history and natural history provided Brunetière with a model for literary criticism:

> . . . de Linné jusqu'à Cuvier, de Cuvier jusqu'à Darwin, et de Darwin jusqu'à Haeckel, on peut dire avec assurance que chaque progrès de la science est un progrès ou un changement dans la classification. De confuse et de vague *systématique*; de *systématique* en devenant *naturelle*; et de *naturelle* en devenant *généalogique*, la classification, toute seule, par son progrès même, a bouleversé les sciences de la nature et de la vie. Il en sera quelque jour ainsi, il en est ainsi, dès à présent, de la critique . . .[47]

In his *Évolution des Genres dans l'Histoire de la Littérature* of 1890, Brunetière's goal is the scientific classification of literary genres on the

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[46] Quoted from Gullace, *Taine and Brunetière on Criticism*, p. 22.

[47] Ferdinand Brunetière, *L'Évolution des Genres dans l'Histoire de la Littérature. Introduction: L'Évolution de la Critique depuis la Renaissance jusqu'à nos Jours*, first pbd 1890, 6th ed. (Paris, 1914), p. 31.

principles he derived from natural history and Darwinian theory. In Brunetière's view, literary genres resemble zoological species in that they are the products of evolutionary processes involving constant and gradual differentiation and transformation. It is as a result of these processes that genres rise to their heights as well as fade into extinction in the course of literary history. What should be understood is that to Brunetière, a genre was not simply a label to be stuck relatively arbitrarily on literary products of a generally similar kind. Rather, he saw genres as the fundamental buildingstones of literary history, present in some primordial form even before the actual creation of the work of art. To describe the evolution of literary genres was therefore to describe the essential course of literary history.

For Brunetière, the theory of the evolution of genres is the key to the establishment of scientific criteria for literary judgment. The function of criticism, he argued, was to classify the individual works of art in relation to the evolution of their genres. It was against the moment of a genre's fullest evolutionary maturity that the literary work should be measured. Only the individual work which is closest to its genre at the height of its evolutionary development can claim true classical status. In this way, critical judgment theoretically no longer depends on individual taste, but is rooted in the observance of evolutionary principles in literary history. In other words: it is history itself which is the true scientific critic.

However, it is not difficult to see that this theory finally backfires upon itself. Who, after all, will decide when a particular genre reaches its peak in the evolutionary process, and who, again, will measure how far removed from this peak the individual work of art really is? In the end, Brunetière cannot escape the charge that he too, like Taine, bases his theories on preconceived notions of value, which in his case are of a strongly traditionalist, moralist, and classicist kind. Here, his strong condemnation of, for instance, Zola and Baudelaire on moral and aesthetic grounds are cases in point. In his *Short History of Literary Criticism*, Vernon Hall Jr. asks himself with evident surprise 'Who could have predicted that the beloved genres of the neoclassicists would now come back under the protection of the theory of evolution?'[48] René Wellek, who has much praise for Brunetière's contribution to critical theory, has also pointed out how Darwinism is finally not central to his interests, but rather a sign of the times:

> Brunetière . . . lived at the time in which Darwinism made its deepest impression, and he adopted from it not the idea of historical evolution alone but specifically the idea of the evolution of species. Though literary genres exist as institutions exist and one can write their history, they are not biological species, and the

[48] Vernon Hall Jr., *A Short History of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1963), p. 124.

> analogy between the history of genre and the evolution of a species is a tenuous one.[49]

As mentioned earlier, Brunetière's theories in themselves may have had few repercussions in England, but a critic like John Addington Symonds was strongly influenced by evolutionary theory. Before, however, we return to England, there is one other French 'scientific' critic who needs to be mentioned in this context, a critic even more obscure nowadays than Brunetière, but certainly of greater contemporary influence in England: Emile Hennequin.

Emile Hennequin

Emile Hennequin's proposal for a scientific system of literary criticism, a small book entitled *La Critique Scientifique*, was published in 1888, the year in which Hennequin died in a bathing accident at the age of 28.[50] Hennequin's only other works, two collections of miscellaneous essays entitled *Ecrivains francisés* and *Quelques Ecrivains français*, were published posthumously in 1889 and 1890 respectively. All three of these books were forgotten quickly enough, but at least *La Critique Scientifique* created an initial stir which is worth noting, especially since it did not go unobserved in England either. The book was reviewed by Edward Dowden in the *Fortnightly*, and, as we shall see, discussed at length by J.M. Robertson in his *New Essays towards a Critical Method*.[51]

Of all the proposals towards scientific criticism discussed here, Hennequin's *La Critique Scientifique* is the one which has the outward appearance of being the most rigorously scientific. From the start, Hennequin leaves no doubt that he wants to dispense with judgment altogether. For him, 'real' literary criticism is unequivocally objective analysis in terms of cause and effect, a 'travail de science pure, où l'on s'applique à démêler des causes sous des faits, des lois sous des phénomènes étudiés sans partialité et sans choix.' [2]

For this type of scientific criticism, Hennequin coins the term *esthopsychologie*, which he further defines as 'un ordre de recherches où les oeuvres d'art sont considérées comme les indices de l'âme des artistes et de

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[49] Wellek, *History of Modern Criticism. Volume 4: The Later 19th Century*, p. 66.

[50] Page numbers inserted in square brackets in the main text refer to the modern reprint edited by Dirk Hoeges which appeared in Heidelberg in 1982. The two main sources of information for Hennequin's life and work are Enzo Caramaschi, *Essai sur la Critique Française de la Fin-de Siècle: Emile Hennequin* (Paris, 1974); Dirk Hoeges, *Literatur und Evolution. Studien zur französischen Literaturkritik im 19. Jahrhundert. Taine – Brunetière – Hennequin – Guyau* (Heidelberg, 1980).

[51] Edward Dowden, 'Literary Criticism in France', *Fortnightly Review*, 46 n.s. (1889), pp. 752–3; *NETCM*, pp. 26–36.

l'âme des peuples.' [3] Here, it is clear that Hennequin has taken his cue from Taine, whom he saw as the initiator of a line of literary investigation which regarded the literary work as a collection of signs revealing the psychology of its author and of the nation from which it springs. Although Hennequin felt that Taine's efforts had in some respects failed to be true to their own theoretical starting–points, especially with regard to the *race, milieu, moment* theory, he took from Taine the outlook on literary criticism as a psychological and sociological science, and defined his own new science of *esthopsychologie* as 'la science de l'oeuvre d'art en tant que signe.' [22] This science, Hennequin contended, sat somewhere between three analogous sciences which had already achieved a more advanced state: aesthetics, psychology, and sociology. Before an 'esthopsychological' synthesis could be arrived at, literature as a system of signs should be examined separately from the three angles of these sciences first.

With regard to the aesthetic analysis of literature, the first task for the literary 'analyste' is to determine the exact nature of the emotions produced by a literary work, as well as the conscious and unconscious means employed by the author to produce these emotions. Hennequin distinguishes – somewhat obscurely – between *real* emotions and *aesthetic* emotions. Real emotions are those which are inevitably and objectively aroused by a particular work of art: the 'real' emotions stimulated by a tragedy are naturally different for everyone from those triggered by a comedy. Aesthetic emotions, however, 'un phénomène cérébral additionel', are of the most intensely personal kind, attached to our most private experiences of pleasure and pain: 'elles comprennent le moi comme sujet souffrant et joyeux.' [36] It is of these emotions that the essential artistic experience is constituted, and it is the task of the science of *esthopsychologie* to determine by which elements in the work of art they are produced. Hennequin believed, with all the optimism of his positivist perspective, that it would become possible to do this with scientific precision, and that *esthopsychologie* could even make a considerable contribution to psychology, 'la connaissance générale des émotions'. [57]

In the psychological analysis of literature which Hennequin proposes next the work of art should be regarded in relation to its producer. As far as the artist himself is concerned, Hennequin held that 'L'oeuvre d'un artiste est le signe compréhensible de son esprit.' [85] He displayed great confidence in the findings of contemporary moral scientists like Spencer, Wundt, Taine, Bain, and Maudsley: 'Grâce à ses progrès des sciences morales, notre travail d'interprétation et d'explication doit aboutir à la connaissance complète de l'esprit dont on aura analysé les manifestations et pénétré les parties.' [87] Exactly how the *esthopsychologiste* should go about dissecting the individual psychology of the author by means of his work, Hennequin does not indicate. By the end of this chapter, he can only repeat that psychology and

esthopsychologie combined may contribute significantly to our knowledge of the human psyche: 'Elles vérifieront les lois sur leur objet même et contribueront à faire découvrir celles qui appartiennent au développement propre de l'homme.' [92]

In his analysis of literature on a sociological basis, Hennequin does provide a new and potentially interesting methodology. Much of this chapter is concerned with a refutation of Taine's theory of *race*, *milieu*, and *moment*, which, Hennequin felt, did not sufficiently take into account the forces contributed by the individual. Hennequin believed profoundly in the ability of 'great men' to determine the course of history, and it was therefore only with extreme caution that certain characteristics of the artist might be traced back to race, environment, or epoch. Hennequin then makes the fruitful suggestion that criticism should not so much seek the relation between the author and the three determinants suggested by Taine, as between the literary work and its appreciative audience, its 'admirers':

> . . . les admirateurs d'une oeuvre d'art doivent posséder une organisation psychologique analogue à celle de son auteur, et l'âme de ce dernier étant connue par l'analyse, il sera légitime d'attribuer à ses admirations les facultés, les défauts, les excès, toutes les particularités saillantes de l'organisation mentale qui lui aura été reconnu. [139]

Hennequin concludes that it is not so much the *milieu* which creates the artist, as Taine had suggested, but the other way round. The artist creates his own audience, and it is by studying this audience that the spirit of a nation reveals itself: 'une littérature exprime une nation, non parce que celle–ci l'a produite, mais parce que celle–ci l'a adoptée et admirée.' [162] Again, however, Hennequin fails to supply the tools by means of which a sociological examination of an author's audience would become possible, and the suggestion is unfortunately largely left to stand on its own.

Finally, an esthopsychological examination of a work of art should be a synthesis of the three types of analysis described above. As an example of such a synthesis, Hennequin devotes an appendix to a specimen examination of Victor Hugo. This has the form of an analytical table, employing a great variety of headings and sub–headings. The 'Analyse Esthétique', for instance, first distinguishes between the means of arousing aesthetic emotion, and the effects of such emotions. Then the means are further broken down into external and internal means, after which the internal means are described under headings like vocabulary, syntax, composition, etc. The whole analysis ends with some short conclusions, which immediately show up the central deficiency in Hennequin's system. Of Hugo's admirers, for instance, he concludes that they

possess 'un verbalisme exalté, se traduisant par un idéalisme optimiste vague et humanitaire, mais impratique et non résultant de l'expérience; peuple idéologue.' [242] One might well ask why such an elaborate system of analysis is needed to arrive at such a trite conclusion, as did the anonymous reviewer of *La Critique Scientifique* in the *Spectator* of 29 December 1888: 'This is a sufficiently severe and comprehensive judgment, but it has no more force or authority than if it had been arrived at by more ordinary means; and, indeed, we doubt whether an exclusive use of M. Hennequin's method would enable him to form it.'[52] The inevitable conclusion is that Hennequin finally proved unable to bridge the wide gap between his theory of criticism and its practical applications. His emphasis, however, on the relevance of readership analysis to critical investigation may stand as an important contribution to nineteenth–century critical theory.

Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett

In his *La Critique Scientifique*, Hennequin on the whole has little praise for British criticism, which he finds distinctly lacking in scientific discipline. He does, however, make a notable exception for the work of Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, whose *Comparative Literature* appeared in 1886, the fruit, as Posnett later wrote, of ten years of labour.[53] Immediately after the publication of his book, Posnett, who was trained as a lawyer, left England to become Professor of Classics and English Literature in Auckland, New Zealand.[54] When fifteen years later Posnett looked back upon the effects his book had had in an article for the *Contemporary Review*,[55] he noted with satisfaction that his suggestion of establishing university chairs of Comparative Literature had been adopted in the United States, France, and in other countries, and that on the whole, the idea of comparative literature was still very much alive. However, the book had of course also had its share of adverse criticism, which Posnett put down to the obtuseness of 'amateur critics', whose only function was to act as 'a guidepost to popular ignorance'. [856–857] In order to counter this ignorance, he set out in his *Contemporary Review* article to provide a short sketch of the leading

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[52] *Spectator* (29 December 1888), p. 1858.

[53] Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (London, 1886). Chapter four of the book, entitled 'The comparative method and literature' was reprinted in *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, 14 (1965), pp. 65–71.

[54] *A Supplement to Allibone's Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors*, ed. John Foster Kirk, 2 vols (Philadelphia, 1891), II, p. 1246.

[55] Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, 'The Science of Comparative Literature', *Contemporary Review*, 79 (1901), pp. 855–72. This article is referred to in the main text by page numbers in square brackets. It was reprinted in *Comparative Literature: the Early Years*, eds Hans–Joachim Schulz and Philip H. Rhein (Chapel Hill, 1973), pp. 183–206.

principles of the new science of comparative literature which he had first proposed in his *Comparative Literature*, and it is this sketch which provides the most convenient access to Posnett's ideas.

At the foundation of Posnett's proposal for a theory of literature and literary criticism is a triad which shows that he has had the opportunity to learn from both Darwinian and Spencerian theories of evolution, as well as from Taine: social evolution, individual evolution, and the influence of the environment on the social and individual life of man. First of all, Posnett followed Spencer in defining social evolution as 'the multitude of recorded facts that prove a progress of human society from smaller and less organised to larger and more complex systems.' [858] With regard to the nature of these systems, Posnett assumed 'the gradual expansion of social life, from clan to city, from city to nation, from both of these to cosmopolitan humanity, as the proper order of studies in comparative literature.'[56] He then set out to demonstrate how each of these phases left its mark 'in a literature peculiarly its own', making even the technical definition of literature a different thing at different periods. [859]

Unlike Hennequin, Posnett is clearly no believer in the theory that 'great (literary) men' are dominant determinants in the evolutionary process: 'All these nice discriminations of time and sound, upon which the strength and beauty of a literature so largely depend, are made *for* the man of letters and not *by* him.' [861] Nonetheless, Posnett does not underestimate the importance of the individual in literary evolution. He defines the term individual evolution as 'only a brief expression for a vast mass of facts that show a development of human consciousness, a development of conscious feeling as well as of conscious reason.' [861] There is no mistaking the positivist tendency in such a statement, and Posnett clearly believed in the upward direction of evolutionary processes, seeing continual mental progress in all history: 'The progress of consciousness is no mere surmise, but the faithful interpretation of man's mental history.' [862]

As far as the influence of the environment is concerned, Posnett perceives a subtle interaction between the influence of the environment on the one hand and social and individual evolution on the other hand. He describes how the poet, in moving away from his social group towards an 'intense' individualism, develops a new relationship towards the environment, finding in it 'a meaning and a magic charm', to which a less developed consciousness would not be sensitive. [863] It is only a poet in such an advanced and new relation to his environment who is capable of what Posnett calls 'world–literature', a universal kind of literature severed from the influence of a defined social group, displaying an ideal range of human sympathy.

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[56] Posnett, *Comparative Literature*, p. 86.

What, then, is the method of comparative literature by means of which we can arrive at a more precisely defined conception of this 'world–literature'? Posnett defines it concisely as follows: 'It consists in retracing the steps man has taken individually and collectively in reaching the highest social life, the widest and deepest personal consciousness as yet within his ken.' [864] He respectfully acknowledged his theoretical debt to the legal work of Sir Henry Maine:

> I found in *Ancient Law* and other works of Sir Henry Maine splendid examples of an historical principle . . . This principle, in its legal form, was the progress of society from status to contract; and I soon found that it was only the legal aspect of the much larger principle of evolution from communal to individualised life and thought which summarises a vast mass of facts to be found in ethical and economic and logical studies as well as in jurisprudence. [871]

In 1882 Posnett had published a small book entitled *The Historical Method*, in which he had attempted to show that 'the function of the historical method lies in tracing back all kinds of truths, popular or scientific, ephemeral or of more permanent value; to the experiences that give them birth.' [871] In *The Historical Method*, Posnett had confined himself to the fields of law, ethics and economics, and it was in his *Comparative Literature* that he attempted to apply the same method to literature.

Posnett's decision to apply the comparative method to literature appears to have been motivated to no insignificant extent by his contempt – this does not seem too strong a word – for the arbitrariness of contemporary critical standards. The literary–critical scene of his day appeared to him a profoundly disturbing spectacle: 'In the absence of historical and comparative study criticism resolves itself into an incoherent mass of personal dicta dependent on the likes and dislikes of critics and coteries of critics and on the changing fashions of literary opinion.'[867] It is interesting to note that this contempt has its roots deep in moral soil. Posnett embraces Goethe's ideal of 'Literary imagination in the service of the highest truths and diffusing these truths through the medium of human emotion' and expresses the need for a 'strong desire to separate historically and practically the living truths from the dead, and a noble resolve to carry out this work of separation with fearless honesty'. [869] Here, after extensive meanderings in the land of science, we are back on familiar Victorian critical territory, where Arnoldian signposts once again show us the way. In terms of practical criticism, this led Posnett to a sharply expressed disapproval of aesthetically inclined critics and literary men, those 'artistic fops who degrade literature into a stylist's toy and talk with amazing

effrontery of what they are pleased to call the moral indifference of art'. [869] To Posnett the Victorian theorist of literature, art and morality are inseparable, as are morality and science. That this makes Posnett very much a child of his time, he would perhaps have been the first to admit.

Posnett's theory of literature and literary criticism, although hardly part of mainstream critical history, has not entirely escaped twentieth–century notice. Posnett is generally credited with giving currency to the term 'comparative literature',[57] and his name tends to be mentioned by comparatists at the opening of histories of the discipline of comparative literature, although not always with approval.[58] Elinor Shaffer, however, has claimed for Posnett's work that it 'marks a very important phase not only in the development of comparative literature, but of modern literary criticism in general: for the scientific pretensions of criticism are a notable feature of our own century.'[59] This is a claim that might profitably be extended to include the other (British) scientific critics mentioned in the present chapter, although it should be added that Posnett's approach, with its pretensions to laying bare the springs of world–literature, in a sense has the widest theoretical scope. Although driven by an intense dislike of the practice of literary criticism as he himself experienced it, Posnett offers little by way of guidelines for practical criticism. His main interest is in the *phenomenon* of literature, not in its evaluation on the basis of value–judgment, and in this sense Posnett is perhaps closest to the spirit of present–day literary theory of all the scientific critics dealt with here. Be that as it may, its antiquated scientific terminology stamps *Comparative Literature* as very much a product of its time, and a rather arid one at that. Posnett betrays little love or enthusiasm for literature, and while his book is certainly of historical interest, it remains somewhat of a literary–critical curiosity.

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[57] See René Wellek, 'The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature', in *Comparatists at Work*, eds Stephen G. Nichols and Richard B. Vowles (Waltham, 1968), pp. 3–29. Wellek refers to Posnett's book as 'crucial for the establishment of the term "comparative literature"' (p. 19).

[58] See Ulrich Weisstein, *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory* (Bloomington IN, 1973), pp. 222–5. Weisstein dismisses Posnett on account of his insistence on the importance of national literary history and social milieu rather than on 'world literature'. Posnett also receives a brief mention in Paul van Tieghem, *La Littérature Comparée* (Paris, 1946), p. 33, and in M.–F. Guyard, *La Littérature Comparée* (Paris, 1951), p. 10. For Posnett's influence on two American comparatists, Francis Gummere and A.S. Mackenzie, see Michael E. Moriarty, 'H.M. Posnett and Two American Comparatists', *Yearbook of Comparative and*
General Literature, 14 (1965), pp. 15–22.

[59] Elinor Shaffer, 'The 'scientific' pretensions of comparative literature', *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, 2 (1980), p. xi.

Richard G. Moulton

Richard Green Moulton (1849–1924) was one of the pioneers of the University Extension Movement in Great Britain, and later in the United States, where he became Professor of Literary Theory and Interpretation and Head of the Department of General Literature at The University of Chicago.[60] The following is the confident opening–statement of his *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist. A Popular Illustration of the Principles of Scientific Criticism*, the first edition of which appeared in 1885.[61]

> In the treatment of literature the proposition which seems to stand most in need of assertion at the present moment is, *that there is an inductive science of literary criticism.* As botany deals inductively with the phenomena of vegetable life and traces the laws underlying them, as economy reviews and systematises on inductive principles the facts of commerce, so there is a criticism not less inductive in character which has for its subject–matter literature. [1]

More particularly, this statement stands at the beginning of the 'Introduction', in which Moulton makes a case for an inductive science of literary criticism as opposed to the loose practice of judicial criticism. The advocacy of a more systematic approach to literary study based on the inductive method is a recurrent theme in Moulton's work and is variously reflected in studies like *The Ancient Classical Drama* (1890), *The Literary Study of the Bible* (1895), *World Literature and Its Place in General Culture* (1911), and finally in his theoretical *magnum opus*, *The Modern Study of Literature* of 1915, in which Moulton attempted 'to arrive at a synthetic view of the theory and interpretation of literature.'[62] However, to gain the clearest impression of Moulton's views on scientific literary criticism, the 'Introduction' to his *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* provides a suitable starting–point.

As the opening statement shows, Moulton felt strongly that the fate of a scientific literary criticism relied on its unequivocal endorsement of the inductive method. Indeed, Moulton argued, 'the whole progress of science

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[60] For Moulton's biography, see W. Fiddian Moulton, *Richard Green Moulton* (New York, 1926); S[hailer] M[atthews], 'Moulton, Richard Green', *Dictionary of American Biography*, (New York, 1934), XIII, pp. 291–2.

[61] Richard G. Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist. A Popular Illustration of the Principles of Scientific Criticism* (Oxford, 1885). The page references in square brackets inserted in the main text refer to the third, revised and enlarged edition of 1893.

[62] Richard G. Moulton, *The Modern Study of Literature: An Introduction to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Chicago, 1915), pp. vii–viii.

consists in winning fresh fields of thought to the inductive methods', and since induction was generally accepted as 'a regimen for healthy science', it was actually no more than common–sense to apply it to the field of literature also. [1] There it would be able to perform a most important function by moving criticism away from mere value–judgement. As with most other critics with scientific pretensions mentioned in this chapter, Moulton's adoption of the scientific method is motivated by his dissatisfaction with the arbitrariness of critical judgment as handed out by all and sundry, whether in the press or in popular conversation. Although Moulton did not feel that such judicial criticism was wholly without function, he argued that literary criticism could never attain the status of a science without a clear separation between criticism as *judgment* and criticism as *investigation*. There is no mistaking Taine's influence when Moulton states that 'the one is the enquiry into what ought to be, the other the enquiry into what is', and 'the criticism of taste analyses literary works for grounds of preference or evidence on which to found judgments; inductive criticism analyses them to get a closer acquaintance with their phenomena.' [2]

Moulton then anticipates a charge likely to be levelled against inductive criticism from the side of the advocates of judgment. Is not literary appreciation 'a thing of culture' and is not judicial criticism 'a wise economy of appreciation, the purpose of which is to anticipate natural selection and universal experience'? [6] Moulton's answer consists of the counter–charge that, rather than aiding literary appreciation, judicial criticism may prove no inconsiderable obstacle to it, since 'the mere notion of condemning may be enough to check our receptivity to qualities which, as we have seen, it may need our utmost effort to catch.' [7] Moulton has no difficulty in listing several pages of notable blunders in the history of Shakespeare criticism, leading him to the conclusion that 'the whole history of criticism has been a triumph of authors over critics.' [8] He accordingly provides an outline history of criticism in five stages by which he attempts to show the gradual progress away from judgment and towards analysis. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, he does afford judicial criticism a place in literary study, but one that is entirely outside the realm of science: 'It finds its proper place on the creative side of literature, as a branch in which literature itself has come to be taken as a theme for literary writing; it thus belongs to the literature treated, not to the scientific treatment thereof.' [21–22] It is the failure to keep judicial and analytical criticism separate that has resulted in a whole history of mutual confusion.

Subsequently, Moulton turns to the more direct question of what is implied by the inductive treatment of literature. Contrary to those critics who approached scientific criticism from the external frameworks of history, sociology, anthropology etc, Moulton proposes to focus exclusively on the 'facts' of literature and art, 'the literary and artistic productions themselves: the

dramas, epics, pictures, statues, pillars, capitals, symphonies, operas – the details of these are the phenomena which the critical observer translates into facts.' [22] The stumbling–block of the elusive nature of literature is to be overcome by reference not to taste but to the literary production itself. To the inductive critic, 'the question is not of the nobler view or the view in best taste, but simply what view fits in best with the details as they stand in actual fact.' [24] Moulton thus arrives at the following axiom: 'Interpretation in literature is of the nature of a scientific hypothesis, the truth of which is tested by the degree of completeness with which it explains the details of the literary work as they actually stand.' [25] In this way, the critic should be able to arrive at 'a superstructure of exposition' which does not rely on some given authority, but rather 'upon a basis of indisputable fact'. [25]

Thus Moulton arrives at his view 'that inductive criticism is mainly occupied in distinguishing literary species.' [32] Here he puts great emphasis on the existence of law in art, not in the sense of prescriptive rules, but rather as 'descriptions of the practice of artists or the characteristics of their works, when these will go into the form of general propositions as distinguished from disconnected details.' [33] As there are laws in nature, like Newton's law of gravity, so there are laws in literature, which leads Moulton to his next axiom, 'that art is part of nature'. [36] Moulton asked himself 'If there is an inductive science of politics, men's voluntary actions in the pursuit of public life, and an inductive science of economy, men's voluntary actions in pursuit of wealth, why should there not be an inductive science of art, men's voluntary actions in pursuit of the beautiful?' [36–37] Such a science should, however, be in accordance with Moulton's fourth axiom, 'That literature is a thing of development.' [37] The inductive critic should at all times be wary of judging by fixed standards and adopt the highest degree of historical relativism, he will 'accord to the early forms of his art the same independence he accords to later forms.' [39] Free from historical prejudices, he may become a true scientific investigator.

After this introduction (of which the above has been a brief outline), the main part of *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* is taken up by studies of ten of Shakespeare's plays, followed by a *Survey of Dramatic Criticism as an Inductive Science*, in which Moulton attempts to deal with the question 'how much of the total effect of Shakespeare's work arises from the fact of the ideas being conveyed to us in the form of dramas, and not of lyric or epic poems, of essays or moral and philosophical treatises.' [321] Moulton draws up a 'simple scheme for Dramatic Criticism', in which 'all the results of the analysis performed in the first part of the book could be readily distributed under one or other of the main topics – Character, Passion and Plot'. In spite of his claim to simplicity, Moulton goes quite far in his enthusiasm for classification and, by way of example, provides elaborate tables outlining the plots of nine of

Shakespeare's plays. The book finally ends with the observation that 'the discussion of Shakespeare has again and again reminded us of just that greatness in the modern Drama which judicial criticism with its inflexibility of standard so persistently missed.' [397]

This final observation, containing both an explicit value–judgment and a general refutation of such judgments, points to a central – and, by now, familiar – deficiency in the practical outcome of Moulton's theoretical work which contemporary critics were not slow to point out. Robertson, as we shall see, devoted a lengthy chapter in his *Essays towards a Critical Method* to a demonstration of Moulton's failure to avoid *a priori* judgments in his discussions of Shakespeare's plays. Robertson's friend and fellow–rationalist William Archer, writing in *Macmillan's Magazine*, called Moulton's theory 'an outgrowth of acute Shakespeareolatry'.[63] Archer contended that 'Far from being inductive, Mr. Moulton's criticism is in reality a series of deductions from the pregnant axiom "Shakespeare can do no wrong."'[64] Moulton does, in fact, get into hopeless difficulties when he tries to put his theory into practice. His critics rightly point out that *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* is replete with value–judgments, and that the intended separation of judicial and objective criticism never even comes close to being carried out.

John Addington Symonds

Of all the English Victorian critics who concerned themselves with the establishment of a science of criticism, John Addington Symonds is probably the best known, although it seems it is mainly for biographical rather than for literary–theoretical reasons that Symonds continues to incite interest today. Judging from what we know of Symonds's life and personality, one might even go so far as to say that he would make an extremely unlikely defender of the rigours of scientific method. Symonds had only second–hand knowledge of contemporary scientific theory and practice and seems to have lacked any real understanding of it. However, his work shows him embracing the findings of science and in particular of evolutionary theory with a wholeheartedness and ardour that is suggestive of a profound personal need characteristic of the age. For him as for so many of his contemporaries, Darwin's and Spencer's evolutionary theories seemed to offer a promise of future progress which, amid the ontological confusion that scientific revelations had caused, filled a deeply–felt want. To Symonds, science was no enemy to religion, but rather the

[63] William Archer, 'Criticism as an Inductive Science', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 54 (1885), p. 52.

[64] *Ibid.*

means by which religion might be revitalized: 'The tendency of scientific ideas . . . is to spiritualise religion, to dissipate the materialistic associations which environ theology in its mythological stages, and to emancipate the individual from egotism in the presence of that universal Being of which he is a part, and to the manifestation of which he contributes.'[65]

Furthermore, evolution provided Symonds with a scientific framework in which to place his own historical research. Symonds's biographer Phyllis Grosskurth has called his masterpiece *Renaissance in Italy* a 'testament to Symonds's faith in science'.[66] *Renaissance in Italy* represents the culmination of Symonds's idea that works of art undergo the same evolutionary process of growth, maturity and decay as any other organism:

> All things with which we are acquainted are in evolutionary process. Everything belonging to human nature is in a state of organic transition – passing through necessary phases of birth, decline, and death. Art, in any one of its specific manifestations . . . avoids this law of organic evolution, arrests development at the fairest season of growth, averts the decadence which ends in death, no more than does an oak.[67]

In terms of criticism, Symonds argued in his *Renaissance* that this evolutionary perspective would enable the critic to place the work of art in relation to the overall stage of evolution of a particular period, which calls to mind Brunetière's theory of the evolution of literary genres. On the one hand, the evolutionary approach to art would help to engender a high degree of historical relativism, so that criticism would no longer have to worry about 'the decline of Gothic architecture into Perpendicular aridity and flamboyant feebleness, over the passage of the sceptre from Sophocles to Euripides or from Tasso to Marino', etc. The critic would be led to 'comprehend the whole' and adopt 'the habit of scientific tolerance'.[68]

On the other hand, this 'toleration and acceptance of unavoidable change' should not lead the critic away from what was after all his true function: to judge.[69] Symonds affirmed emphatically that criticism, viewed from whatever angle, finally came down to the exercise of judgment. However, the critic as judge was to make use of a set of rules which was applicable specifically to art.

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[65] John Addington Symonds, 'The Philosophy of Evolution', in *Essays, Speculative and Suggestive*, first pbd 1890, 2nd ed. (London, 1893), p. 10.

[66] Phyllis Grosskurth, *John Addington Symonds, A Biography* (London, 1964), p. 249.

[67] John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy. The Catholic Reaction*, 2 vols (New York, 1887), II, p. 371.

[68] *Ibid.*, p. 372.

[69] *Ibid.*

It would not do for the critic of art 'to apply the same rules as the moralist, the naturalist, or the hedonist.' Great art has its own eternal laws, its own 'abiding relations', as Symonds calls it, which provide the test of right aesthetic judgment.[70] Symonds defines these laws in moralistic terms which are strongly reminiscent of Arnold's famous dictum of great literature as 'the best that is known and thought in the world':

> All art is a presentation of the inner human being, his thought and feeling, through the medium of beautiful symbols in form, colour, and sound. Our verdict must consequently be determined by the amount of thought, the amount of feeling, proper to noble humanity, which we find adequately expressed in beautiful aesthetic symbols.[71]

Although Symonds expresses his awareness that it would be unrealistic to expect that the uncertainties of private, subjective judgment could ever be eliminated from criticism, he is convinced that by concentrating on 'abiding relations', the permanent laws in literature, these uncertainties can be considerably diminished. Symonds's conception of the true critic is finally that of the 'enlightened man', whose judgment 'will . . . be the taste of a mentally healthy and impartial person, who has made himself acquainted with the laws of evolution in art and society, and who is able to test the excellence of work in any stage from immaturity to decadence by discerning what there is of sincerity and natural vigor in it.'[72]

These are, in sum, Symonds's views on the relation between science, evolution and criticism as expressed in his *Renaissance in Italy* of 1887. He later took this section as a starting-point for an article entitled 'On Some Principles of Criticism', which is the main source for Symonds's views on scientific literary criticism.[73] Here, Symonds distinguishes three conceptions of criticism. The first is that of the critic as judge which we have already noted. The second is described by Symonds as that of the critic as 'showman', a rather awkward denomination for the critic who has resigned his pretension to the function of judge, and has adopted that of 'literary botanist' instead:

> It is not his function to pronounce from the bench on what is right or wrong, to acquit or to condemn, to apply canons and extend the

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[70] *Ibid.*, p. 374.

[71] *Ibid.*

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 375.

[73] John Addington Symonds, 'On Some Principles of Criticism', in *Essays, Speculative and Suggestive*, pp. 58–85. Page numbers in square brackets referring to this article are inserted in the main text.

> province of orthodox taste by enforcing laws. On the contrary, he ought to be content with studying and displaying the qualities of things submitted to his intellect and sense. He must unfold the 'virtues' of the works of art with which he has been occupied. He must classify and describe them, as a botanist the plants with which he has to do. [66]

Although this type of critic seems to correspond conspicuously with Taine's conception of the objective scientific critic, this is not what Symonds has in mind. Rather, the function of the critic as 'showman' seems to be to convey as lively an impression as possible of his own personal reading experience, without translating this experience into rules of criticism to which others should adhere. It is, regrettably, not quite clear what exactly Symonds is aiming at. He fails to give examples of the 'critic as showman' and his image of it seems on whole a rather hazy one.

With his third conception of the critic as a scientific analyst we are on more familiar territory, occupied by the likes of Taine and Hennequin. As far as judgment is concerned, this type of critic finds himself occupying a middle position between the critic as 'judge' and the critic as 'showman':

> He must become the natural historian of art and literature, must study each object in relation to its antecedents and its consequents, must make himself acquainted with the conditions under which the artist grew, the habits of his race, the opinions of his age, his physical and psychological peculiarities. Only after having conscientiously pursued this method, may he proceed to deliver judgments; and these will invariably be qualified by his sense of relativity in art and literature. [66]

Although Symonds subsequently pronounces that the ideal critic should combine the qualities of all three types in one, there is little doubt that his sympathies are finally with the scientific type of critic. He is, however, curiously hesitant to admit so. On the one hand he obviously feels attracted to what science has to offer to criticism of art, but on the other hand he also tends to shy away from science, feeling instinctively that it does not do sufficient justice to the human element in literature,

This becomes especially clear when Symonds next proceeds to the question whether it is possible for criticism ever to become a 'real' science. Although criticism can obviously never become a science in the sense that mathematics or geology are sciences, Symonds speculates initially that it may attain to the status of a science in the way that ethics and political economy have: as 'a department of systematised and coordinated knowledge'. [70] However, he immediately undercuts his own argument by stating that criticism is, after all,

'not of the same nature as science', and is, in fact, 'not a department of systematised knowledge, but an instrument or organ ancillary to all sciences and to every branch of investigation which implies the exercise of judgment.' [71] Symonds then goes on to a closer investigation of the problem involved in subjective judgment, along psychological and sociological lines which may well have been suggested to him by his predecessors in the field of science and criticism:[74]

> In criticism the mind of one individual, qualified by certain idiosyncratic properties, and further qualified by the conditions of his race and age, is brought to bear upon the product of another human mind, itself qualified by certain idiosyncratic properties and further qualified by the conditions of a certain race and century. [75]

This 'intrusion of subjectivity', as Symonds calls it, makes correct interpretation one of the prime difficulties in criticism. The only remedy finally lies in a heightened awareness of the problem itself, in a deeper reflection on the principles underlying critical judgment:

> To this extent, then, through the perception of what criticism ought to be, through the definition of its province, and through the recognition of what is inevitably imperfect in its instrument, the method tends to being in its own way scientific. [78]

In this way, Symonds can be seen to waver between a distinct attraction towards a scientific conception of criticism on the one hand, and a general feeling of uneasiness that science is after all incapable of fully interpreting human experience on the other. Although Symonds is much more emphatic in his claims as to the services science may render literary criticism, his ambivalent attitude towards the subject finally resembles that of Leslie Stephen as discussed earlier this chapter. In the end, Symonds's criteria for judging both art and criticism of art are, like Stephen's, made of the kind of solid Arnoldian moral stuff which should be familiar enough to readers of Victorian literary criticism.

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[74] Symonds was familiar with the work of Hennequin, whose *La Critique Scientifique* he praised as 'an important contribution to the psychology of style'; see Symonds, 'Notes on Style', in *Essays, Speculative and Suggestive*, p. 239.

Conclusions

In a sweeping survey of a century of literary theory, Wallace Martin draws attention to the fact that the very word 'theory' was in fact 'introduced into the critical vocabulary by writers interested in creating a 'science of criticism'', such as Emile Hennequin and J.M. Robertson.[75] Martin rightly points out that the term only gained currency with later writers like I.A. Richards and the Russian Formalists, but the fact itself is there. The 'scientific' critics whose work I have discussed in the previous pages constitute an early phase in the development of literary theory which has hardly received its fair share of scholarly attention. The names of E.S. Dallas, H.M. Posnett, and R.G. Moulton are all but forgotten, and our familiarity with figures like G.H. Lewes and J.A. Symonds partly depends on factors which have little to do with their work on critical theory. The Victorian age is only too often depicted as virtually devoid of literary–theoretical reflection, and in the previous pages I hope to have shown that this is a marked misrepresentation of the case, whether or not the scientific critics whose ideas I have presented were fully successful in solving the problems they set out to address. Moreover, their impact on the contemporary literary scene should ensure them a place in literary–critical history, even apart from the question whether their writings still have any value within the context of current theoretical debates. That, however, is not a question I propose to answer here.

When surveying these Victorian attempts at establishing a science of criticism (recognizing that J.M. Robertson's ideas have so far been left out of the equation), a number of overall conclusions present themselves. First of all, there seems to be little ground for referring to an actual 'movement' of critical science. In one of the few books that deal with the phenomenon of scientific literary criticism, the historian of science Herbert Dingle catalogues (though incompletely) the various proposals for a scientific criticism which the past hundred years have witnessed, and concludes (in my view correctly) that 'a noteworthy feature of these attempts is their independence of one another.'[76] Every critic, Dingle argues, who set out to devise a scientific approach to criticism seems to have started out with a clean slate. We are, in fact, not dealing with an organized effort on the part of a small band of critics to create a uniform system of scientific standards for criticism. Although there are certainly many links and similarities between the ideas of these scientific critics, what we actually have are so many individualistic efforts, often (this

[75] Wallace Martin, 'The Epoch of Critical Theory', *Comparative Literature*, 31 (1979), p. 323.

[76] Herbert Dingle, *Science and Literary Criticism* (London, 1949), p. 3.

certainly goes for Robertson, as the second part of this chapter will show) highly critical of previous attempts which on the surface would seem to be striving towards the same goal. It is true that the works of Taine and Darwin have proved important sources of inspiration, as in the case of Symonds, but from a strictly theoretical point of view their influence is limited. Symonds's guiding light may be Darwin's theory of evolution, but he is fascinated by the *idea* of it, not by its technical and theoretical ramifications. In the end, each critic attempts to devise his own 'system', turning variously to evolution (Symonds), psychology (Lewes and Dallas), and anthropology (Posnett) for inspiration and scientific legitimization of their theories.

Dingle tentatively attributes this high degree of individualism to 'the fact that the matter has been almost entirely in the hands of critics and not of scientists; and critics, however impartial they may succeed in making their judgments, necessarily inherit a tendency to judge rather than to describe.'[77] Whether or not critical science had better be left to scientists than to literary critics readers must decide for themselves, but Dingle does highlight an important element these Victorian scientific critics had in common: their difficulty in combining the role of judge with that of scientist. The most extreme case is surely that of R.G. Moulton, whose elaborate plea for an inductive, objective science of criticism cannot hide his lack of awareness that he is constantly meting out the most subjective of value–judgments. Although all these critics turned to science hoping to find a basis for a more objective approach to the study of literature, none of them finally proved capable of effectively separating the role of 'objective' scientist from that of 'subjective' critic. It appears, in fact, that at the bottom of this conflict lies an even more fundamental problem, namely the question as to the exact definition and nature of scientific method. This question is not explicitly or extensively addressed by any of these critics, and we are finally left with the suggestion that 'scientific criticism' was to no small extent a term which had the right ring of authority, and could conveniently be used to cover any number of theories.

An analogous situation may perhaps be found in the rise of a science of history, which was, far more than scientific literary criticism, a hotly debated issue in the second half of the nineteenth century. With the rise of history as a professional discipline came the demand for a new historiography which was to be objective and factual.[78] It was Robertson's great example Henry Thomas Buckle who, with his monumental *History of Civilization in England*, made one of the most ambitious attempts at establishing a science of history. Buckle

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[77] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[78] Myron C. Tuman, '"Irritant Poison": Idealism and Scientific History in Late–Victorian England', *Studies in Romanticism*, 22 (1983), pp. 407–19.

refuted the view that 'in the affairs of men there is something mysterious and providential, which makes them impervious to our investigations' and set out to trace the 'fixed laws' which had governed human behaviour in the past and still governed it now.[79] Although Buckle was widely respected for his tremendous erudition, his views were generally rejected or even ridiculed by the intellectual establishment.[80] A revealing reaction to Buckle's ideas may be found in J.A. Froude's essay on 'The Science of History' of 1864. Froude's response is characterized in a nutshell by the following passage:

> Philosophies of history, sciences of history – all these, there will continue to be; the fashions of them will change, as our habits of thought will change; each new philosopher will find his chief employment in showing that before him no one understood anything; but the drama of history is imperishable, and the lessons of it will be like what we learn from Homer or Shakespeare – lessons for which we have no words.
>
> The address of history is less to the understanding than to the higher emotions. We learn in it to sympathise with what is great and good; we learn to hate what is base. In the anomalies of fortune we feel the mystery of our mortal existence, and in the companionship of the illustrious natures who have shaped the fortunes of the world, we escape from the littleness which clings to the round of common life, and our minds are tuned in a higher and nobler key.[81]

After reading such a statement, it may come as somewhat of a surprise to find that Froude advocated an approach to history which emphasized analysis and impartiality, and stressed the importance of presenting facts rather than interpretations and theories: 'The historian, we are told, must not leave the readers to themselves. He must tell them what he himself thinks about those facts. In my opinion, this is precisely what he ought not to do.'[82] Myron C. Tuman has observed how it was this advocacy of impartiality and objectivity which came to be labelled by late-Victorians as 'scientific', leaving Froude and others 'in the seemingly difficult position of advocating history as a science

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[79] T.H. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, first pbd 1857–1861, 2nd ed., 2 vols (London, 1871), I, pp. 5–6.

[80] Robertson's *Buckle and his Critics* (London, 1895) is a lengthy and arduous defence of Buckle against such adversaries as Leslie Stephen and Theodore Parker.

[81] J.A. Froude, 'The Science of History', in *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, Everyman ed., 2 vols (London, s.d.), II, pp. 29–30.

[82] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

while simultaneously rejecting nomothetic thinking.'[83] Once again it becomes clear that the epithet 'scientific' was one that found many disparate uses.

If we now translate this brief characterization of late-Victorian historiography to the literary-critical scene of the same age, we find that those critics we have labelled 'scientific' would have ranged themselves unequivocally on Froude's side. We might even go so far as to say that if we replaced the word 'history' in the longer quotation from Froude by 'literature', none of the scientific critics would find anything substantial to quarrel with (although they might not relish the high emotional tone). They too advocated impartiality and objectivity, but, as the summaries of their works were meant to show, beneath the modern guise of scientific methodology lay the familiar core of Victorian morality, with its persistent Romantic belief in the ennobling qualities of literature. Again and again these critics stress that their scientific efforts are directed towards a moral purpose, and this makes it impossible to maintain the not uncommon division of Victorian criticism in a moral, aesthetic, and scientific branch. Parrinder too makes use of this triad when in his *Authors and Authority* he discusses these moralistic, aesthetic and utilitarian (or scientific) positions as alternatives which existed, as it were, in separate universes.[84] What the foregoing discussion has attempted to show is that these positions tended to overlap continually, and in some cases even coincided completely. A strict classification of the type Parrinder maintains (admittedly in the service of providing a bird's eye picture of the Victorian critical landscape) both oversimplifies and obscures our view of Victorian literary-critical theory. If there is one thing that binds these critics together, it is not so much their scientific pretensions, as the fact that they propose to approach literature from a theoretical point of view. They may have done so with varying degrees of success, but the efforts themselves remain worthy of serious scholarly attention.

Part 2: Robertson as a Theorist of Scientific Literary Criticism

Introduction

It is now time to turn to J.M. Robertson's own thoughts on scientific literary criticism, a subject which was always close to his heart and to which he devoted much time and energy. His main efforts in the field of scientific

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[83] Tuman, '"Irritant Poison": Idealism and Scientific History in Late-Victorian England', p. 412.

[84] Parrinder, *Authors and Authority*, p. 134.

literary criticism belong to the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when such ideas were, as we have seen, gaining a noticeable degree of currency. In 1889, he published his *Essays towards a Critical Method.* Of the four essays which this collection contains, two were first published in Mrs Besant's *Our Corner* ('The Fable of the Bees' and 'The Art of Tennyson'), while one first saw the light in the more prestigious pages of the *Westminster Review* ('Mr. Howells' Novels').[85] The 148–page treatise on 'Science in Criticism' which opens the volume was, however, especially written for this collection, and represents Robertson's first major effort to come to terms with the problems involved in approaching literary criticism in a scientific manner. Divided into four parts, the first part is entitled 'Historic Phases' and provides a sweeping survey of the history of criticism from Aristotle to Arnold; the second part discusses 'Recent Nihilism', i.e. the contemporary tendency (embodied by R.G. Moulton in particular) to look upon judgment in criticism as entirely subjective and therefore to be dismissed as futile; the third part is headed 'The Problem Stated', while in the fourth, Robertson proposes to discuss 'Principles of Practice'. In spite of what this seemingly strict division might suggest, the structure of the essay remains relatively loose, and it admittedly bears some of the marks of a first attempt, such as a general lack of economy in the presentment of new ideas and concepts. However, in spite of these rough edges, the essay is on the whole remarkable for its breadth of ideas, historical scope, and insight into the processes underlying the formation of critical judgment.

In 1897, *New Essays towards a Critical Method* appeared, containing essays on Poe, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Burns, R.L. Stevenson on Burns, and Clough. Most of these essays had already appeared in print elsewhere,[86] but the first piece in the collection (counting 53 pages) was again a new theoretical treatise on science and criticism, entitled 'The Theory and Practice of Criticism'. Remarkably enough, this essay never once refers to the earlier work on the same subject, thus creating the impression that Robertson was bent on making a radically new departure. This, however, would be a distinct overstatement of the case, since many of the points made in 'Science and Criticism' are reformulated in the later essay, albeit more concisely and economically. However, in one crucial aspect 'The Theory and Practice of Criticism' does represent a new start from the earlier treatise. In the Preface to *ETCM*, Robertson expresses his regret that he had not been able to make use of Hennequin's *La Critique Scientifique*, which he had only been able to examine

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[85] 'The Fable of the Bees', *Our Corner*, 7 (1886), pp. 92–103; 'The Art of Tennyson', *Our Corner*, 9 (1887), pp. 87–97, 167–80; 'Mr. Howells' Novels', *Westminster Review*, 66 n.s. (1884), pp. 347–75.

[86] The essay on Poe, for instance, had been published in *Our Corner*, in three successive parts, as early as 1885.

after the manuscript of the collection had already been placed in the publisher's hands. He commented that 'It was impossible to read that able treatise without gaining new ideas and new points of view; and I weighed the expediency of readjusting my own essay so as to embody some of these.'[87] [*ETCM* iv] At the time, Robertson decided against this course of action, but eight years later he did refer extensively to Hennequin's theories in *NETCM*, and the French critic's influence is very much in evidence there. This may lead us to the conclusion that the need to afford Hennequin's ideas a place in his own theoretical framework may well have inspired Robertson to attempt a new formulation of his thoughts on the subject of science and criticism, without reference to the earlier work.

The essays in *ETCM* and *NETCM* are Robertson's main theoretical statements on the relation between science and literary criticism. In a letter to T.S. Eliot of September 1922, Robertson writes of his work in this field in the tones of an older man who has seen the error of his ways, referring to the days of his youth as the time when 'I dallied with the hope of establishing a decent method in criticism.'[88] However, only three years earlier Robertson had published an article on 'Criticism and Science' in the *North American Review*,[89] showing that he had far from abandoned the ideas he had developed over thirty years ago. If anything, this article provides further proof of the astonishing continuity in Robertson's work, and might as plausibly have been written in the days of *ETCM* and *NETCM*.

In fact, even in such a relatively late work as *Modern Humanists Reconsidered* of 1927 (when, by the way, his productivity had by no means abated), he remains preoccupied with the science of literary criticism, as the following statement clearly shows:

> It is the penalty of literary criticism that, seeking to be in itself, in some degree literature, yet also science in respect of demonstrable truth, it normally tends to be as subjective as the writings it judges; whereas its true function is the rendering of reasons. Failing in that, it is justifiably dismissable as falling short of the nature of science – as being, in fact, only egotistic didactic literature, possibly attractive as such, but as judgment negligible.[90]

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[87] References to *ETCM* and *NETCM* are given in square brackets in the main text.

[88] Robertson to T.S. Eliot, 3 September 1922. This letter is in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am, ff. 123–124.

[89] 'Criticism and Science', *North American Review*, 209 (1919), pp. 690–6.

[90] *Modern Humanists Reconsidered*, p. 1.

For Robertson – more than for any of his predecessors or contemporaries in the field of science and criticism – a scientific approach to literary criticism was the inevitable and logical consequence of the rationalist axioms which he held highest in the world, epitomized in the above quote by the familiar Robertsonian phrases 'demonstrable truth' and 'the rendering of reasons'. Since he held unwaveringly to these tenets all his life, it need not surprise anyone that he remained equally loyal to the idea of science in criticism throughout his career.

In the following pages, I will examine what exactly Robertson meant when he mentioned the words 'science' and 'criticism' in the same breath. An economical introduction to some of his central critical concepts is provided by his 1919 article on 'Criticism and Science', which I will therefore give separate treatment. Subsequently, for a more detailed analysis of Robertson's views on the subject, I will turn to the essays on science and criticism which appear in *ETCM* and *NETCM*. Since there is a great deal of overlap between these two works, I have resisted the initial impulse to deal with these separately, and have instead opted for what may be called a 'bird's eye perspective' of Robertson's critical position, with particular emphasis on his reactions to those scientifically inclined critics whose ideas I have presented in Part 1 of this chapter. Finally, a number of general conclusions are drawn with regard to Robertson's overall status as a theoretician of literary criticism.

'Criticism and Science': Key Elements

Although this essay was written over twenty years after Robertson had made his two major statements on science and criticism in *ETCM* and *NETCM*, it provides a particularly useful introduction to a number of key elements in Robertson's overall approach to the subject. First of all, Robertson sets out to clarify the conception of science and scientific method which underlies his critical views. He attacks the view that criticism is not a science by careful discrimination between the expressions 'a science', 'science', and 'scientific'. 'A science', he argues, is usually defined as 'a body of ascertained and co–ordinated knowledge, formulated in textbooks, and in the main or in large part agreed upon among special students, with reservation only of those matters in dispute for the time being.'[91] [692] To this specialized, fixed view, Robertson opposes the more general and flexible concept of 'science', which he describes as follows:

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[91] References to Robertson's essay are given in square brackets in the main text.

> Science, which primarily means simply knowledge, has come to mean exact and tested and coordinated knowledge, and thus really signifies just the carefully ascertained truth about things; even as 'scientific' points to a methodical and circumspect as against a haphazard or purely impressionist way of thinking, inquiring, and judging. [692]

Within the terms of this definition, it is true that criticism cannot claim to be 'a science'. However, nor can geology, astronomy, or biology, fields of knowledge which have progressed through countless errors, rectifications and reformulations, and to which scientific status is nevertheless generally granted. On these grounds, Robertson reaches the conclusion that

> Scientific method is just careful, critical, reflective, tested and consistent method. For that very reason, there arises in regard to literary criticism, which claims to be reflective and judicial, the demand that it shall become less haphazard, less arbitrary, more consistent than it has been. [693]

Here, Robertson effectively equates science with his own brand of rationalism, so that a concise definition of his scientific method may be said to run something like 'rationalism practically applied'. The emphasis on consistency should by now have a familiar ring, and it becomes evident that for Robertson, literary–critical science is fundamentally bound up with the formulation of consistent literary judgments. Through criticism, it should be possible to achieve a certain measure of consensus regarding literary phenomena.[92] Therefore, to dismiss the question of judgment with a simple statement to the effect that 'tastes differ' would constitute a vast underestimation of the possibilities of science.

If scientific criticism is in fact the rationalist's attempt to achieve order and consistency in critical judgment, how does it propose to go about in the specific case of literature? Robertson's answer is that

> the proposed critical science, or scientific criticism, would aim at tracing law and causation in respect of literary effects, following up the literary phenomena on the one hand to the mental structure of the writer studied, and on the other hand to the varieties of

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[92] In the Preface to *ETCM*, Robertson voices this opinion as follows: 'Obviously, consensus of literary opinion cannot be reckoned on to a further extent than consensus in matters of personal conduct, legislation, and social action: all that can be hoped is that it may be carried as far.' (p. iv)

> mental structures and bias which determine the varying responses of the reader. [693]

The initial object of literary criticism is therefore threefold: to study the literary work itself, to study its author, and finally to study its readership. These three elements are entangled in a web of complex causal relations, which it is finally the critic's task to unravel. Robertson's use of such naturalistic phraseology as 'mental structures' is indicative of his belief in the critic's ability to achieve quite definite conclusions in this area.

Robertson then proceeds to attack the view that science and literature occupy distinctly separate realms and are naturally at odds. If there is one thing that science and literature have in common, he argues, it is the fact that 'Science and literature alike are at perpetual grips with inertia: the struggle is the eternal and fundamental conflict between the forces of change and the forces of resistance to change.' [694] Far from being enemies, science and literature fight shoulder to shoulder on the side of progress in the battle against the spirit of conservatism.

Here we are afforded a glimpse of one of Robertson's most stringent criteria for literary judgment: only literature which furthers human progress may be considered of the highest possible rank. There is, therefore, an unquestionably political and moral dimension to Robertson's system of value judgments, a dimension which, in its turn, has its origins in an evolutionary conception of literary history. If literary products are looked upon as engaged in a struggle for survival, only those products which are most effectively suited to the overall line of evolution – which progresses ever upwards – may survive the test of time and become true classics. To name but one example: in spite of Tennyson's obvious formal virtuosity, in Robertson's view he can never aspire to the true status of a classic due to his deeply ingrained conservatism. 'Such', this article concludes, 'is the law of evolution, in literature as in life.' [696]

Thus 'Criticism and Science' conveniently brings to the fore a number of aspects we will encounter again and again in his major literary–theoretical works: the view of science as 'simply' the methodical, consistent way a rationalist goes about solving a problem, in the full awareness of the subjectivity of value judgments; the emphasis on the intricate causal relations in the work–writer–reader triad; the evolutionary conception of (literary) history fuelled by a very Victorian trust in progress, and the use of this conception as an evaluative criterion in criticism. These elements do not only form the building blocks of Robertson's 1919 article on 'Criticism and Science', but they are also fundamental to an understanding of his overall theoretical approach to criticism. Bearing these in mind, we may now more

profitably turn to the essays on science and criticism which appear in *ETCM* and *NETCM*, and constitute Robertson's main statements on the subject.[93]

ETCM and NETCM: Definition of Criticism and the Role of Judgment

Both *ETCM* and *NETCM* are, as I mentioned before, characterized by a rather loose composition, which, in combination with Robertson's occasional tendency to let his eloquence run away with him, does not simplify the task of offering a structured account of the ideas presented in these essays. I have therefore chosen to follow certain thematic threads which run through both essays. First of all, Robertson's attempts at defining criticism and the role of individual judgment in criticism are given careful consideration. This is followed by a discussion of the particular issues which Robertson saw as essential to the formulation of a scientific approach to criticism: consistency of appreciation; the relation between criticism and the concepts of evolution, progress, and rationalism; the role of the moral and aesthetic element in judgment and the causal factors involved in the formulation of a 'criticism of life'. Robertson's criticism of other critics' views on these subjects will be continually present in the background.

The first question Robertson sets out to answer in both essays is a deceptively simple one: what is criticism? As always, Robertson approaches his goal with the highest degree of confidence, and his statements on the subject are strongly expressive of the feeling that since even the dimmest of critics might inadvertently have stumbled upon the answers, it is all the more astonishing that celebrated critics like Arnold had failed to do so. In *ETCM*, criticism is defined in typical off-hand fashion as 'a process that goes on over all the field of human knowledge, being simply comparison or clash of opinion.' [*ETCM* 1] The definition which opens *NETCM* is somewhat wider in scope, though similar in intent:

> Criticism is obviously enough the expression of the most general and the most fundamental form of mental activity, indeed of the essence of all activity, the play of attraction and repulsion, liking and dislike. Even if the word be limited to the naming of a process of strife, it points to what the ancient thinker saw to be the 'parent of things.' The serenest and the dullest of us must needs criticise: there is no respite from the function while we live and think. [*NETCM* 1]

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[93] In referring to these essays, I will use the titles of the collections in which they appear, i.e. *ETCM* and *NETCM*, rather than the somewhat impractical and potentially confusing proper titles of the separate essays.

This makes criticism as natural a function of the human constitution as breathing, and it is therefore no more than logical that criticism should also turn its attention towards literature, literary criticism being 'only a department of inquiry entered from the same kind of motives as lead men to scientific research commonly so–called.' These motives are further specified as 'the impulses of curiosity and self–expression – the desire to know, and the need to express notions.' [*ETCM* 1] To expect literature to be exempt from such impulses would be a gross denial of one of mankind's most deeply–rooted and universal characteristics.

Such a 'naturalistic' view of criticism obviously has far–reaching implications for the problem of judgment in literary criticism which so preoccupied critics like Hippolyte Taine and R.G. Moulton. To Robertson, the whole question whether judicial literary criticism is a worthwhile activity hardly merits serious consideration:

> The last question [i.e. whether criticism is a worthwhile activity] we must just dismiss, as we do that other, as to whether life is worth living. Whatever be the truth about the poet's singing, we do every one of us criticise because we must: the trouble is only too clearly that as a rule we pipe bat as the linnets sing. The decisive proof of this is that those writers who expressly set out to veto judicial criticism, to restrict criticism to a mere process of descriptive cataloguing, always end by practising judicial criticism like other people. [*NETCM* 3]

Two of the three opponents of judicial criticism Robertson particularly has in mind here we have already met: Hippolyte Taine and R.G. Moulton. The third is the leading American novelist and man of letters William Dean Howells.

Not surprisingly, Robertson applauded Taine's search for method in literary criticism and willingly conceded that 'the method of M. Taine has helped to set up intelligent currents through the whole area of criticism.' [*ETCM* 141] Furthermore, he considered the Frenchman's method 'a valuable step to the right conception of a writer as being like every one else an organism in an environment, conditioned by that as well as affecting it.' [*NETCM* 18] However, with regard to solving the problem of the intrusion of subjective feelings into critical judgment, Robertson saw Taine's approach as markedly deficient. In spite of his claims to setting up a criticism which abstained from pardoning and proscribing while limiting itself to description and classification, Taine, Robertson observed, 'proscribed and pardoned like the rest of us, and that avowedly.' [*NETCM* 3] The problem was that, in his proposal to study every work of art as the outcome of the combined causal forces of race, environment, and moment, 'Taine was taking for granted a number of

sociological propositions which were themselves in the stage of tentative science, and which were thus a bad foundation for detailed judgments.' [*NETCM* 18–19]

Robertson illustrates his critique of Taine by means of a practical example. In his view, the customary outcome of a 'pre–scientific' comparison of Shakespeare and Corneille tended to be that 'Shakespeare had great passion and imagination but little judgment in the use of incident' while Corneille was said to be 'stiff and declamatory'. [*NETCM* 19] Taine's method greatly improved upon such generalizations by looking at the characteristics of the audience, the methods in use on stage, and the literary taste of the time, before reaching any conclusions. Thus, Taine brought to criticism a much wider scope, a much broader perspective:

> Taine's method is in fact a method of historical conception, involving judgments on a dozen points besides those of literary effect considered *in vacuo*, or the abstract merit of a tragedy as such; and the widening of the survey is almost sure to purge the student's mind of some of the prejudice which sets uncultured or narrow–minded people gibing against whatever in an alien product is specially strange to them. [*NETCM* 19–20]

However, Robertson saw clearly that Taine's pretensions to strict objectivity were impossible to maintain:

> Yet not only does this widening of the survey still leave room for dispute on the original issue of the aesthetic merit of the given work, but it opens up new ground of dispute as regards the critic's view of the "race," his picture of the environment, and his account of the prevailing influence or "moment." On all of these heads he may be prejudiced, hasty, or arbitrary. He may falsely simplify his task by slumping the race in terms of a few of many characteristics, a few of many types; he may give a mere section of the environment as showing the whole, and he may be equally arbitrary as regards the "moment." Some of us think Taine has at times done all these things

In this manner, Robertson demonstrates convincingly that any attempt to exclude the element of subjective judgment from literary criticism (or, indeed, criticism in general) is inherently doomed to failure. This tenet applies in equal measure to the literary–theoretical work of R.G. Moulton, in which the demand for objectivity in criticism is even more strongly expressed. In *ETCM*, Robertson devotes an entire section of eighteen pages (entitled 'Recent Nihilism') to a discussion of the theory of inductive criticism which Moulton

had expounded in his *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*. Moulton's book rouses him to a level of relentless destructive reasoning which he normally reserved for the staunchest of religious defenders. Robertson's main point is that Moulton does exactly that which he proposes to dispense with: pass judgment on literary merit. Although Moulton's contention that all formal criticism should be based on analysis can only be welcomed, his chosen analytical method misses its mark completely:

> To show that 'judicial criticism' – the criticism which praises and blames – is always non–inductive and always non–scientific, he selects old critical judgments *which he regards and knows to be generally regarded, as absurdly wrong*. These he exhibits as sample cases of judicial criticism, *saying nothing of the judicial criticism which has condemned them*, but describing the survival of the contrary opinion as a case of 'defeat of criticism' by 'science,' or by 'authors.' [*NETCM* 48]

Moulton, in other words, is not only guilty of cooking the books by manipulating his evidence, but, even more perversely, of

> passing 'judicial criticism' of the most Rhadamantine order, praising and blaming the critics, past and present, for their virtues and vices, and pronouncing the miscarriages of Addison and Johnson, oddly enough, 'odd anachronisms,' when one would think that was the one thing they were not. [*ETCM* 50–51]

And where Moulton, in spite of his theory, has no problems criticizing the critics, he stops being critical at exactly the wrong moment:

> In the very act of protesting against the criticism which praises and blames and frames hierarchies, Mr. Moulton exultingly announces that 'Finally criticism comes round entirely to Shakspere'[94] – that is, puts him at the top of the hierarchy, as does Mr Moulton, who pronounces him (p. 40) 'the great master of the Romantic Drama.' [*ETCM* 55]

What Robertson accuses Moulton of is, in fact, an extreme form of Shakespeare idolatry, a subject on which he would have much to say in his own work on Shakespeare, as the following chapter will show. His final conclusion is that Moulton's book makes but a 'harrowing spectacle, in which the pathos of failure is dashed by a sense of the Icarian presumption which would neither

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[94] This is the spelling of Shakespeare used by Moulton in the first edition of his book.

hesitate to blame nor stay to calculate difficulties.' [*NETCM* 64] Regrettably, Moulton's reaction to this devastating – but acute – criticism has not been recorded.

One might expect Robertson to have been a little more charitably inclined towards William Dean Howells's view on the same subject. Robertson was an admirer of Howells's novels and praised their realism, while Howells agreed with the Scotsman on the necessity to pursue literary criticism in a more scientific vein.[95] However, with regard to the question of judgment in criticism they could not see eye to eye. We find Howells's view most extensively expressed in an influential essay on 'Criticism and Fiction' which he published in 1891, and in which he offered the following scathing characterization of the contemporary judicial critic:

> It is still his conception of his office that he should assail with obloquy those who differ with him in matters of taste or opinion; that he must be rude with those he does not like, and that he ought to do them violence as a proof of his superiority. It is too largely his superstition that because he likes a thing it is good, and because he dislikes a thing it is bad; the reverse is quite possibly the case, but he is yet indefinitely far from knowing that in affairs of taste his personal preference enters very little.

However, among Howells's biting comments we also find a vision of what the critic should ideally accomplish:

> He is not tolerant; he thinks it a virtue to be intolerant; it is hard for him to understand that the same thing may be admirable at one time and deplorable at another; and that it is really his business to classify and analyze the fruits of the human mind very much as the naturalist classifies the objects of his study, rather than to praise or blame them; that there is a measure of the same absurdity in his trampling on a poem, a novel, or an essay that does not please him as in the botanist's grinding a plant underfoot because he does not find it pretty. He does not conceive that it is his business rather to identify the species and then explain how and where the specimen is imperfect and irregular.[96]

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[95] There is, unfortunately, no evidence that Howells and Robertson ever corresponded, nor does Howells seem to have responded to Robertson's criticism in print.

[96] W.D. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*, eds C. Marburg Kirk and R. Kirk (New York, 1959), pp. 20–21.

The critic as botanist is a familiar enough simile which may be traced back to Taine and is also adopted by Moulton. Howells actually goes even further by denying the critic all but the very lowest step on the creative ladder when he remarks how 'Sometimes it has seemed to me that the crudest expression of any creative art is better than the finest comment upon it.'[97]

This was a view of criticism and the critic which held very few attractions to Robertson, and when Howells first voiced such opinions in an issue of *Harper's Magazine* for June 1887,[98] he felt called upon to react in strong terms. To Robertson, there was no reason to privilege the artist over the critic:

> Mr. Howells' novels are, in their degree, criticism of life by the representation of it; that is to say, he gives us what purports to be views of persons and society, saying in effect, This is how things go. Now, it is no special prerogative of the artist so–called to tell his fellows how things go: it is equally the right of the moralist, the historian, the politician, the philosopher, the critic – the preacher, if you will; and to say that any one of these is not free to contradict the artist is no more reasonable than to say that the members of any class may not contradict each other, or members of the other classes; which would be a sufficiently idle dictum. [*ETCM* 123]

It is interesting to note that he therefore also found it impossible to subscribe to Arnold's casual remark in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' to the effect that 'Everybody . . . would be willing to admit, as a general proposition, that the critical faculty is lower than the inventive.'[99] Most (late–) Victorian critics would indeed have been in substantial agreement with Arnold on this point, but Robertson, for one, did not believe in such distinctions of merit:

> We have seen that the only generic difference between the 'critic' and the 'original' writer is that the former, as such and as a rule, writes *àpropos* of books, while the latter, as a rule, writes *àpropos* of things, events, and ideas. [*ETCM* 145]

He even felt that 'the careful prose stylist may be more "creative" than the careless poet' [*ETCM* 145], a point of view certainly not frequently found among his Arnoldian–influenced brethren. In fact, Robertson even appears to

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[97] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[98] W.D. Howells, 'Editor's Study', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 75 (1887), pp. 155–8.

[99] Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', in *Essays in Criticism. First Series*, Everyman ed. (London, 1969), p. 10.

anticipate the views of certain present–day literary theorists, who, in the words of Christopher Norris, 'would welcome the signs of a growing *rapprochement* between creative and critical writing.'[100]

Robertson, then, did clearly not see the inevitable subjectivity of literary judgment as an insurmountable obstacle to establishing a scientific approach to literary criticism. He was, however, fully aware that the scientific critic could not avoid coming to terms with this element of subjectivity in some way or other:

> It is the getting behind spontaneous judgment, the ascertaining how and why we differ in our judgments, that the critics so–called have mostly left unattempted. . . . But, for one thing, the attempt must be made by somebody, and one would fain see an experienced critic do it. [*NETCM* 4–5]

In fact, Robertson even went so far as to state that in the end, 'the business [of criticism] comes to be just the science of the personal equation.' [*ETCM* 68] In *NETCM*, Robertson offered an extensive survey of E.S. Dallas's *The Gay Science*, which constituted, as we have seen, an ambitious attempt at establishing just such a science. The book certainly appealed greatly to Robertson, who praised it as 'the most considerable English treatise yet penned on the philosophy of criticism'. [*NETCM* 5] But although the central argument of criticism as 'the science of pleasure' struck him as 'symmetrical and attractive' [*NETCM* 6], he felt that Dallas had greatly underestimated the far–reaching implications of his scheme:

> And without seeking to check his reasoning through the too discursive chapters actually written . . . we may at once decide that not only is a complete "science of pleasure," even of intellectual pleasure, an extremely complicated and difficult undertaking, amounting to the main part of a system of psychology, but even an elaborate presentment of it will leave us facing the fundamental fact that "tastes differ," that different things give different degrees of pleasure, or give respectively pleasure and pain, to different people, or to the same people at different times. [*NETCM* 7]

While critics like Moulton and Howells had attempted to separate the subjective element of judgment completely from their theories of criticism, Dallas went to the other extreme and actually gave it pride of place in his system. Since, however, Dallas lacked the intellectual equipment to erect a new

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[100] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory* (Leicester, 1992), p. 211.

and comprehensive system of psychology, the attempt was doomed to fail, and Robertson showed himself not at all surprised that Dallas had only been able to finish two volumes out of the projected four. Dallas had, quite simply, set his aims impossibly high.

However, the fact that Dallas and other scientifically oriented critics had failed to get round the problem of differing tastes did not, in Robertson's view, constitute a fatal hindrance to establishing a science of criticism. That such a science could not attain to the exact status of, say, mathematics or astronomy, he saw as no objection to the validity of its establishment. In both *ETCM* and *NETCM*, Robertson repeatedly pointed to the 'unchallenged' contemporary usage of the terms 'moral science' and 'ethical science', denoting branches of knowledge equally prone to the subjective influence. From this he concluded that 'it will appear there is a sense in which processes of literary and aesthetic judgment may be put under a scientific treatment' [*NETCM* 7]. In our present age, when the phrase 'moral science' sounds distinctly antiquated, such a conclusion certainly seems questionable, but to Robertson, living in a period when science still appeared to hold infinite possibilities, it was a perfectly logical one.

ETCM and NETCM: Consistency of Appreciation

If we for the moment follow Robertson in assuming the validity of a scientific form of criticism that takes the subjectivity of judgment into full account, the question remains as to what form such a criticism should take. Robertson's answer first of all seems to depend very much on the individual critic's capacity for logical reasoning:

> On the instant, there can be little question, each critic must fight for his own hand, giving his reasons for the faith that is in him; and that faith and these reasons will become part of the stream of tendency, either making or not making an effective eddy, telling on the banks. Here our problem becomes part of the general problem of history, and is no more and no less soluble than that. The science *of* criticism goes no further; but science *in* criticism remains to every critic who cares to methodically question his own consistency; and the practical question comes to be whether or not, in a given case, he can not only offer an estimate of a performance which shall be broadly congruous with a considerable body of instructed opinion, but give a persuasive explanation of such differences of instructed opinion as leave many cultured people perplexed. [*ETCM* 93]

The operative word here is once again 'consistency', the importance of which is relentlessly driven home to the reader:

> A man who refuses to accept the test of consistency as a criterion of truth is either confused by words or confused in the very faculty of judgment. In the former case he is a doubtful subject for enlightenment: in the latter, he is impossible. He may keep out of legal trouble; he may even be the most amiable of men; but he is not to be argued with. [*NETCM* 12]

It is therefore not surprising that Robertson finally sums up his conception of critical science as 'the science of consistency in appreciation'. [*NETCM* 17]

What he means by this in more practical terms becomes apparent when we look at a number of pages he devotes in *ETCM* to a symposium which was run in the *Fortnightly Review* from August to November 1887. Prominent readers were requested by the editor to submit their favourite literary passages to the periodical, and Robertson finds much to quarrel with their choices. When Thomas Hardy selects three stanzas of Byron, Robertson is quick to comment that 'the students of poetry are surely quick to agree that these verses are much too lacking in fluidity of movement to be credited with excellence.' [*ETCM* 97–98] Similarly, George Meredith is rebuked for choosing a passage from *Villette*, while in Robertson's view 'there would probably be general agreement in a literary committee that perfection is there missed by reason of stress and spasm of expression.' [*ETCM* 102] Overall, Robertson displays remarkable confidence in the possibility of reaching a more or less general consensus on which literary works (or even fragments of such works) might survive the test of time, as long as the laws of consistency are meticulously observed. He assumes a 'wide agreement as to the beauty and successfulness of certain samples of writing', which he sees as further proof 'that there are bases for a criticism which shall be scientific, or reducible to connected steps of reasoning from verifiable data.' [*ETCM* 105]

The truth is, of course, that in this particular case, Robertson practises exactly what he preaches against. Taking his own personal preferences and dislikes, he turns them into general literary standards and judges by them accordingly. This sudden lapse from logical reasoning is, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, indicative of his faith in the progress that science might achieve in future. As an apostle of science, Robertson takes it for granted here that he has truth on his side, and consequently falls foul of his own theoretical criteria for literary judgment. Consistency in appreciation (his own phrase) is hardly achieved by laying down the law, as Robertson, again paradoxically, would have been the first to admit.

But although Robertson's belief in scientific, consistent method, engendered by the achievements of the natural sciences, may sometimes have led him to over–optimistic conclusions, it was far from boundless. Robertson could not, for instance, endorse the view propounded by the Reverend F.G. Fleay that a thorough grounding in the natural sciences, with an emphasis on mineralogy, classificatory botany, and chemical analysis, was a necessary prerequisite for effective criticism. Fleay was the author of an influential *Shakspere Manual*, in which he pioneered the use of metrical tests to establish the 'true' authorship of Shakespeare's plays. Although as a so–called 'disintegrator' Robertson found many starting–points in Fleay's methods for his own later research into the Shakespeare canon,[101] he felt that Fleay overstressed the necessity of a wide training in the physical sciences for literary criticism. In his chapter on *Troilus and Cressida*, Fleay had written the following:

> We must accept every scientific method from other sciences applicable to our ends. From the mineralogist we must learn by long study to recognise a chip of rock at once from its general appearance; from the chemist, to apply systematic tabulated tests to confirm our conclusions; from both, to use varied tests – tests as to form, as for crystals – tests as to materials, as for compounds . . . . When these things are done systematically and thoroughly, then, and then only, may we expect to have a criticism that shall be free from shallow notions taken up to please individual eccentricities: a criticism that shall differ from what now too often goes under that name, as much as the notions on the determining causes of the relations between wages and capital differ in the mind of a Stuart Mill and that of a Trades–Union delegate.[102]

Robertson found this 'a hasty and overstrained way of putting the case for the advantage to literary criticism from a hold on physical science.' [*NETCM* 41] Although he did agree with Fleay that 'the practice of a physical science may suggest to a student a new analytical test in literature', he felt nonetheless that 'the same test may occur to a student who has never meddled with that science at all.' [*NETCM* 42] Ultimately, what the natural sciences had to offer to literary criticism did not so much have to do with the adoption of specific *methods*, as with the development of a scientific *attitude*, to be found

> first, in the mere habit of exactitude, the avoidance of inconsistency, the sense of the importance of proofs; secondarily, in the probable stimulus to speculative or theorising thought; and

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[101] See Chapter 4, Part 1.

[102] F.G. Fleay, *Shakspere Manual* (London, 1878), pp. 243–4.

> ultimately in the probable widening of philosophic view in general, and of estimate of human capacity in particular. [*NETCM* 43]

The truth is that Robertson's own interest in the specific findings and methodology of the natural sciences was always quite limited. To Robertson the humanist and rationalist (as well as to so many of his like–minded contemporaries), it was the *idea* of science that mattered above all, and proved the real source of inspiration for his critical thought.

ETCM and NETCM: Evolution, Progress, and Rationalism

The same point might justifiably be made with regard to Robertson's whole–hearted adoption of the concept of evolution. He did not so much embrace Darwin's theory as a plausible solution to an abstract scientific problem, but rather as scientifically authorized, all–encompassing proof for his rationalist philosophy of life. The concept of evolution is the backbone of all of Robertson's work, and with regard to his literary criticism, we find that *ETCM* in particular is suffused with evolutionary notions and jargon. Halfway through the essay, for instance, he offers an evolution–inspired modification of his earlier definitions of criticism:

> We might at this stage of the argument take philosophic stand on the final position that criticism (like philosophy) is in the long run the assertion of our personality in that struggle for survival which goes on among opinions as among organisms; [*NETCM* 71]

In his struggle with the problem of subjective literary taste, Robertson subsequently introduces evolution as a possible scientific basis for evaluative judgment. At the core of Robertson's argument lies the contention, reminiscent of Brunetière's theory of literary genres, that only those literary works (as well as periods) which lie closest to the main evolutionary line deserve the epithet 'classic'. On this basis, he passes severe judgment on the Restoration and Augustan period, here referred to as the 'literary interregnum':

> We class the literary interregnum, in short, as a variation that did not persist; and looking from our point of view of life and destiny, we satisfy ourselves that, while it did a service as an interregnum, we can see in its jejune reasoning and consciously artificial key and style a kind of ineptitude of thought and speech, amounting to a falling off in total vitality which it was well to have got past. Beyond this, criticism need not go; but thus far, on the assumptions made, it must go. [*ETCM* 74]

In other words, Robertson sees the outcome of the literary struggle for survival of the past two centuries as a decisive defeat for the Restoration and Augustan period. Time and evolution combined, he argued, have proven as much.

It did not follow, however, that these periods should therefore be dismissed from critical attention. On the contrary: they too constituted important chapters in literary development, and Robertson emphasized that 'in our classification of aspects of literature, we should keep room for the strictly historic or techno–historic interest of every past art form to those interested in art.' [*ETCM* 75] The same historical relativism is applied in a lengthy discussion of the works of Ben Jonson, for which Robertson betrays but little sympathy. He sums up his opinion of Jonson with a cursory statement to the effect that, when set next to Shakespeare, Jonson showed himself a literary deviant, far removed from the main evolutionary line:

> Well, one passes judicial criticism on Jonson to the effect that his was on the whole an unfortunate literary variation, in itself and in respect of its consequences ill–related to the mental and neural life of to–day; and we say this with a conscious eye to what seem to us the elements of eternal fitness in Shakspere. [*ETCM* 83]

However, such criticism, damning enough in itself, did not preclude historical interest in the literary figure as such:

> Yet we remain fully alive to the strong interest of Jonson's mind, character and work, and recommend him not only to the literary students as a great figure in the history of technique, but to the general reader as affording lights on the intellectual and art life of the Shaksperean period which are not to be got in Shakspere. That sufficiently said, judicial criticism has, broadly speaking, done its work with him. [*ETCM* 83]

In spite of Robertson's evident aversion to Jonson, Robertson's keen awareness of the relativity of any literary judgment prevents him from dismissing Shakespeare's competitor completely, at least in theory.

Halfway through his discussion of the 'literary interregnum' and Ben Jonson's work, Robertson asks himself a relevant enough question: 'Does all this sound arbitrary and uncatholic? Or other than "scientific"?' [*ETCM* 75] The gist of the answer he himself immediately supplies is that the very *awareness* of the relative truth–value of literary judgments secures the scientific status of the criticism proposed. Scientific criticism does not mean that the subjective human element should be eradicated from criticism, but that it should be taken into due account as an inalienable part of the process of judgment. After all, Robertson argues, 'I cannot in the nature of things be a

good eighteenth–century Popean and a good Tennysonian.' [*ETCM* 75] It may be possible to defend a preference for Pope on all kinds of excellent grounds, but 'in the matter of art and language, rhythms and music, I cannot choose but prefer the modern, for the same reasons that make me prefer Shakspere to the Popeans on the points in question.' [*ETCM* 76] Robertson realizes that the evolution of taste may be such that a preference for Pope could come to be looked upon as distinctly outmoded, but that is a risk the critic should be willing to take, and, indeed, can never avoid:

> The fashion may change, of course: social evolution may yet take paths parallel to those followed before and after the Restoration; in which case nothing may convince the generation on these paths that to–day's taste is more healthily related to progress than that which we now describe as non–viable. . . . But if time prove to be on my side, as I of course suspect will be the case, the residual fact will be that my "taste" was nearer the main line of evolution. [*ETCM* 76]

As long as the critic is willing to concede the historical relativity of his judgments, science and criticism may go hand in hand.

The phrase 'taste . . . related to progress' used by Robertson in the above quote gives us some first insight into the criteria which Robertson implicitly employs to decide upon the exact direction of this 'main line of evolution'. Like most of his contemporaries, Robertson tended to equate evolution with progress. By some intricate circular reasoning, he consequently based his decision to place a particular (literary) development on or off the main line of evolution on the extent to which this development contributed to overall human progress.

This becomes especially apparent when we look at the concise history of criticism which constitutes the first part of *ETCM*. Robertson's account starts with the pioneering work of Aristotle, and then swiftly moves on to Longinus's essay 'On the Sublime'. His criticism is voiced (as usual) in no uncertain terms:

> The once–renowned treatise "On the Sublime" one reads now (and only the specialist reads it) with an unappeasable sense of futility; not because the criticism it embodies is felt to be bad – on the contrary, it for the most part satisfies the judgment and exhibits great expertness within its limits; but because it is become, as it were, parasitic and dilettantist, a pedant habit of tasting and relishing and objecting, with no real outlook on new practice; and with no suspicion that literature exists for the sake of life, and not life for the sake of literature. [*ETCM* 2]

Although Robertson can admire Longinus's treatise as to some extent a virtuoso performance, he finds it lacking in one essential quality, which he expresses in such phrases as 'forward impulse' [*ETCM* 7], or 'forward–reaching temper' [*ETCM* 9]. What Robertson requires of literature and literary criticism alike is this 'outlook on new practice', a true creative impulse towards fresh literary form and content.

At this point in his argument, Robertson draws an interesting analogy between literary and scientific progress, which sheds some light on how he actually envisaged the specific mechanics of progress. The 'forward–reaching impulse' in literature, he argues, seems to be 'analogous to that projection of the mind beyond experience which in science means discovery and new knowledge.' [*ETCM* 9] Scientific progress is not a matter of gradual, successive steps leading inevitably to new discoveries. Like evolution, science advances in a more haphazard manner, and has to rely on sudden outbursts of creative energy. It is 'in flashes of insight' that the progressive scientist or *litterateur* 'reaches beyond logic to new.' [*ETCM* 34] Such progress does not allow itself to be forced, nor can it be fully controlled. What it requires above all is a cultural climate conducive to progress, a climate in which the 'forward impulse' may flourish, so that it will stimulate these leaps into the future.

Taking giant strides through the history of literary criticism, Robertson observes that the impulse to literary progress had not been current in critical practice for many centuries. In classical antiquity it did not flower: Horace was all but devoid of the 'forward–reaching temper', and while Apuleius may have evinced 'something of creative originality', his was after all an age of 'antiquarianism', 'absorbed in bookish retrospect'. [*ETCM* 9] Skipping the Middle Ages entirely, Robertson arrives at a similar verdict of the Renaissance, 'when critical practice was similarly restricted to a prescription of how best to be classic.' [*ETCM* 9] In England, the attempts of Webbe and Puttenham[103] came to very little: 'Both writers are essentially pedantic statists, duly proceeding to catalogue those large facts of life with which poetry is concerned, but ripe commonplacers in their own thinking.' [*ETCM* 13] Although Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (1595) may have had 'the virile note of the epoch', he too is 'fully half pedant', and incapable of leading criticism and literature into a new future. [*ETCM* 13]

In Robertson's view, it is, in fact, not until roughly the time of the Restoration that things start to change:

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[103] William Webbe (d. 1591) is the author of *A Discourse of English Poetry* (1586); George Puttenham (1529–1590) wrote *The Art of English Poetry* (1589).

> From the time of the Restoration, however, or even earlier, there begins to be apparent a real correlation of non-religious culture with action, of which the sociologically better side is seen in the scientific and freethinking movements, and the rationalism, as apart from the poetry, of the verse. [*ETCM* 15]

From this time onwards, the cultural climate is changing in such a way – albeit very gradually – that it will stimulate rather than thwart progressive criticism:

> An efficient criticism, it is obvious, comes of an efficient culture; and an efficient culture, which means comprehensive knowledge brought into organic relation with life, only begins to be widely predicable of England towards the close of the Commonwealth – that is, precisely at the time when strong political and social influences were about to work intellectual reaction in various directions. [*ETCM* 14]

It is at this point that Robertson the literary critic most obviously and emphatically meets Robertson the rationalist philosopher and historian.[104] The advance of rationalism, science, and literature now clearly all go hand in hand. As the rationalist movement rises and slowly but ineluctably proceeds to clear away the obstacles in the way of human progress – religion being first and foremost among these – so literature and literary criticism may at last come to reach to new heights. As critics, Pope and Addison had taken the first steps, but 'it is not till the next generation that there appears, as part of the now broadened and deepened movement of historic rationalism, a deliberate and methodical survey of the bearings of modern literature, taken as something else than an imitation of the ancient.' [*ETCM* 17]

Here the connection between the rise of rationalism and a new approach to literature is explicitly made, as Robertson heralds the advent of Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism*:

> The "Elements of Criticism," published in 1761, represented in its way the expression, in the walk of *belles lettres*, of that movement of fresh analysis of knowledge which, reaching Scotland, partly by way of France, in a period of quietude after the long fever of fanaticism, yielded such remarkable results alike in physical and mental science, historic research, and economic theory. [*ETCM* 18]

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[104] In fact, in 1889 – the publication-date of *ETCM* – Robertson had not yet produced his major works in these fields.

Although, as we saw before, Robertson concedes that Kames's attempt at a rational science of criticism 'throughout yields a musty odour, as of dry–rot, bodefully significant to those of us who follow his craft' [*ETCM* 19], he has high praise for the critic's catholicity of judgment and the ability to think for himself. These virtues, it is implied, could never have arisen in the figure of Kames had not the broad movement of rationalism paved the way. After all, that which the spirit of rationalism truly touches can never be the same, a rationalist tenet which Robertson further illustrates by means of the combined cases of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He unconditionally attributes those Romantics' contribution to critical history and progress to their early contact with the spirit of freethought:

> That it [English criticism] made progress at all was due . . . to the fact that Wordsworth and Coleridge had in youth drunk so deeply of that very revolutionary spirit against which they afterwards turned like their neighbours. [*ETCM* 37]

ETCM and NETCM: Aesthetics, Morality, and Causality in Criticism

The close link which Robertson thus establishes between rationalism and literature seems to preclude any form of literary criticism based on purely aesthetic criteria. Moreover, it significantly widens the boundaries of what is traditionally considered 'literature'. In *ETCM*, Robertson launches an attack on Swinburne – admittedly hardly a critic congenial to the rationalist frame of mind – for betraying 'a certain professional limitation in the naïve narrowing of the [critical] outlook to just those forms of literary art which consist in rendering thought on things human in verse or prose with an artistic as distinct from a scientific purpose.' [*ETCM* 84] In Robertson's view, Chaucer and Milton do not inhabit universes entirely separate from those of Roger Bacon and Newton, nor are they to be judged by different sets of criteria. The critic who founds his judgments of *belles lettres* on strictly aesthetic, *belletrist* standards runs the severe risk of developing specialists' myopia:

> His data are no longer to him what they are to other people: he now cannot see the wood for the trees, and every tree has become for him a world, in which he notes, not the laws that relate it to the organic and the inorganic cosmos, but the variations of leaf shape and size; variations which he relishes as objective facts, never seeking for the new law which reduces them to intellectual order. That new law comes suddenly from without, from the germinal idea of somebody who has been looking at the processes of things in their masses and tendencies, perhaps without even reading the specialist's literature of microscoped minutiae. [*ETCM* 86–87]

It is, in other words, only the scientific generalist, the critic who has kept abreast of all the latest developments in human knowledge – in fact, such a critic as Robertson himself, or his intellectual mentor Henry Thomas Buckle[105] – who may hope to deliver judgments with any kind of pretence to authority:

> . . . if . . . the literature of the future, as the present argument will assume, *is* to have in its vein a blood digested from all the pabulum of the omnivorous modern intelligence, why then the purely belletrist criticism of our time will one day look curiously Byzantine to such historians as are called upon to give some account of it to a rationally educated generation that will no more dream of reading it as it stands than of repeating the abortive experiments of early alchemy. [*ETCM* 89]

Alongside Robertson's apparent rejection of the aesthetic or art–for–art's–sake approach to literature,[106] we find a wholehearted acceptance of the well–known (and well–worn) Arnoldian formula that literature is 'criticism of life'. Although Arnold had been thinking in the first place of poetry, Robertson applied the phrase to the whole of literature, the boundaries of which might even be stretched to include the writings of a Newton or Darwin. Robertson's interest in literature was, in fact, primarily of a moral nature, which might with equal justice be said of his entire *oeuvre*.[107] To draw a sharp distinguishing line in literary criticism between the aesthetic and the moral aspects of literature was – at least in theory – anathema to him:

> It is quite impossible in practice to separate the criticism of mere literary effect, of poetry and style, of writing which specifically aims at "pleasing," from the criticism of testimony, of theory, of method, of moral tone, of conduct, of "criticism of life," of literary criticism itself. We only need to turn to the work of the greatest critics to see that they will not let themselves be restricted to mere discrimination of artistic "pleasure," in Mr. Dallas's sense of the term. [*NETCM* 11]

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[105] In this context, Robertson wrote of Buckle: 'He is still our one distinguished writer who had mastered alike history, literature, and science.' [*ETCM* 38]

[106] In Chapter 4, Part 3 I will show that, in actual fact, Robertson as a practical critic of poetry owed much more to the aesthetic approach to criticism than he was in theory willing to admit.

[107] The phrase 'public moralist', coined by Stefan Collini in his book *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991) is perhaps the most fitting description of Robertson's position in life.

On this moral basis, Robertson envisaged the actual process underlying literary judgment as the clash between two different 'criticisms of life': that of the author and that of the critic. Both these 'criticisms' are subject to 'individual variations', those causal factors which combine to determine the author's or critic's personality. In defining these factors as 'that of heredity and acquired bias, that of special expertness, that of education' [*ETCM* 89], or 'faith, bias, temperament, and training' [*NETCM* 25], Robertson plays a variation on the Tainean theme of '*race, milieu, moment*' by putting somewhat greater emphasis on individual qualities rather than on the influence of the environment. It is the comprehensive assessment of these qualities which forms the first prerequisite of effective criticism.

Such an assessment should in the first place be a *self*–appraisal on the part of the critic: 'In fine, the perfect scientific critic, the critic of the future perhaps, might be conceived as prefacing his every judgment – or the body of his judgments – with a confession of faith, bias, temperament, and training.' [*NETCM* 25] Robertson provides an elaborate example of such a 'confession', of which it is worth quoting a few lines:

> "I have a leaning to what is called "exact" [*or* religious *or* mystical] thought, with [*or* without] a tenderness for certain forms of arbitrary [*or* spiritual] sentiment which prevail among people I know and like. I value poetry as a stimulus to sympathy and moral zeal [*or*, as the beautiful expression of any species of feeling], caring little [*or* much] for cadence and phrase as such; accordingly I value Browning and Dante and Hugo above Heine and Musset and Tennyson [or *vice versa*]. Regarding literature and the arts as the crown of life, and fine letters as the flower of literature, I set the poets highest in the hierarchy of eminence [*or*, I seek to measure performers in the same line by their relative reach and depth and energy in their own departments]." [*NETCM* 25]

This rigorous self–assessment goes on for many lines more, although Robertson is not blind to the impracticality of the scheme. He modifies his proposal by suggesting that it might be left to the *reader* of criticism rather than to the critic himself 'to draw up for himself a statement of every leading critic's idiosyncrasy, and thus to frame his own diagnosis and explanation of what he feels to be perversities or monstrosities of judgment, in respect of his own possibly fuller knowledge or expertness, or different education, or bias.' [*NETCM* 26] The reader of criticism thereby becomes a critic in his turn, whose 'idiosyncrasies' might again be subjected to the same kind of stringent examination. The critical process having thus been set in perpetual motion, all that criticism can do has in effect been achieved, and Robertson's somewhat

laconic conclusion is that 'Beyond that, I do not know that the errors of criticism can be rectified.' [*NETCM* 26]

In spite of this conclusion, Robertson felt that one critic in particular had made an important contribution to the rectification of essential critical errors: Emile Hennequin. In *NETCM*, he quotes extensively from Hennequin's *La Critique Scientifique*, and he even offers a full translation of the Frenchman's schematized analysis (divided into an aesthetic, psychological, and sociological analysis) of Victor Hugo. Robertson is unusually abundant in his praise, especially when comparing Hennequin's scheme with that of Taine:

> It seems hardly possible to carry vigilance and exactness of method further; and the whole scheme, in its way, seems to me a masterpiece of critical analysis. It improves in a measure on the method of Taine. It substitutes for a vague and largely arbitrary premiss of "race" characteristics an exact study of the characteristics of the author in hand, as gathered from his works themselves; it shows how special, how individual, was Hugo's literary bias; how he evoked applause in respect that many of those around him had his characteristics in a minor degree. On these heads Hennequin had previously shown the arbitrariness of Taine's implications as to race and environment, in that one race yields such divergent types, and one environment, one "moment," such differences of theme, predilection, and method. [*NETCM* 33]

Although building on his work, Hennequin had removed from Taine's scheme those elements which induced further arbitrariness of judgment, and replaced them by the fruitful suggestion that the influence of the reading public was a causal factor of tremendous importance in the processes of literary creation. Robertson was duly grateful to Hennequin for thus revealing a new link in the causal chain underlying the genesis of the literary work.

He was not, however, entirely uncritical of Hennequin's work, particularly with regard to the latter's summing up of the spirit of the French nation:

> Can it be that, after rejecting as inexact and arbitrary Taine's way of summarising the qualities of a race, Hennequin himself, in an access of pessimism, fell into Taine's error, and summed up the French nation without any attempt at discrimination as to what characteristics are specially French, and what common to most European nations? [*NETCM* 34]

The question, of course, is a rhetorical one, and Robertson was acutely conscious of the dangers involved in ascribing particular characteristics to particular nations. He adduces further evidence of the dubiousness of

Hennequin's propositions on national character by quoting the Frenchman's conclusions on Dickens. In an essay on Dickens which, like all of Hennequin's books, was published posthumously in a collection entitled *Quelques Écrivains Francisés*, Hennequin concludes that 'the verbal faculty in him predominates over the reflective, that he idealises, that he misrepresented human nature, simplifying and twisting it, in his way, as much as did Hugo.' [*NETCM 34*] This harsh verdict – in which he certainly saw a measure of justice – made Robertson wonder why Hennequin did not logically conclude 'that Dickens had his English popularity in virtue of the commonness of his intellectual peculiarities and defects among the English nation; that his characteristics are "national"'. [*NETCM* 34] The answer is supplied by Robertson himself: had Hennequin in fact drawn such a conclusion, he would also have had to admit that those typically English 'peculiarities and defects' were as much typically German as English, since Dickens had always been extremely popular in Germany as well. On these grounds Robertson could not but assume that there was something wrong with Hennequin's concepts of national characteristics in general, and with his sociological analysis of the case of Hugo in particular. Much though he admired Hennequin's efforts, which may actually have inspired him to resume work on critical theory and write *NETCM*, such logical *lacunae* he could not forgive.

The fact that even the contemporary critic with whom he was perhaps most in accord fell a prey to such logical inconsistencies was no reason for Robertson – eternal believer in progress that he was – to doubt the future of a form of literary criticism which the spirit of science had breathed upon. As in any other branch of science, the pronouncements of scientific criticism were subject to constant reappraisal, and ultimate truth always seemed to be receding just beyond the horizon. This is the conclusion we find at the close of *NETCM*, and to understand that it is by no means a fatalistic one, but rather an inducement to a constant renewal of critical efforts along scientific, methodical lines, is to get at the core of Robertson's philosophy of life as well as of criticism. It seems no more than appropriate to leave the final summing up to himself:

> With such tasks, such possibilities, and such duties, he [the critic] has surely enough to do, as beside any brain-worker whatever. That there is for him no finality, no "last word," no objective fixity of result, such as men are wont loosely to connect with the idea of "science," will be made a reproach to him only by those who do not distinguish between the spirit and purpose of science and certain of its data. And that he is finally a propagandist, an artist in judgment, so to speak, will be held to mark him off from scientific function only by those who miss the very plain truth that all scientific teaching commonly so called is at bottom propaganda

> and the expression of an intellectual bias. At a time when it is zealously sought to turn this truth against all science, in the interest of Irrationalism, which is intellectual Anarchism, its use in the service of reason and science may perhaps be the more readily agreed to. And to the critic, finally, the certainty that, do what he may, he will leave inconsistency and oversight and fallacy in his work for the children of his tribe to detect, need be no more paralysing a thought than the general certainty of the mutation of all things. He plays his part like another. In the struggle of opinions for survival he takes his chance as all opinion–makers must. [*NETCM* 53]

Conclusions

In neither *ETCM* nor *NETCM*, Robertson can make us forget the extent to which he is a child of the intellectual climate of his time. He is as much the die–hard rationalist and controversialist in these works of critical theory as he is in his books on the history of freethought or the existence of Jesus, to name but two of his fields of interest. He believed in science, progress, and evolution in a way and with a certainty which we, from our endlessly more cynical perspective, can no longer share. It is in particular his evolutionary optimism that may strike the modern reader as naive. Robertson, as I have tried to show, displayed a disconcerting belief in a future in which a critical consensus might reign, in which all the complex conflicts and issues of 2,500 years of literary–critical history might be resolved by the combined workings of time and evolution. As a matter of course, he positioned himself and his own opinions squarely on the evolutionary line running towards this great goal. Thus Robertson, always so wary of utopias as a political thinker, nevertheless created his own literary–critical version of one.

On similar grounds, it might also be argued that Robertson does not really offer a literary–critical method as such. In fact, his most fruitful suggestion towards such a method is borrowed (with slight adaptations) from Hennequin, who, in his turn, leaned heavily on Taine: to view the life and work of both author and critic (the critic responding to the author) in the light of psychological and sociological causes. It was in particular Hennequin's proposal that the author's literary *ambience* was a much underestimated factor in the genesis of his work which Robertson found stimulating, and adopted enthusiastically. However, he seems quite willing to leave it at that, and does not propose further emendations of Hennequin's scheme which might lead to the setting–up of an improved method of critical inquiry. In both *ETCM* and *NETCM*, the emphasis is quite clearly on the 'towards'; the actual goal, as Robertson frankly admits, is still a long way out of sight.

To no small extent, this is the result of the elusive quality of the problem of literary judgment, which, admittedly, Robertson too did not manage to solve. His attitude towards this problem is in fact an ambivalent one. On the one hand he quite obviously tries to come to terms with it, seeking out those psychological and sociological factors which contribute to the formation of literary opinion. On the other hand, he realizes full well that such attempts are in essence futile, and will lead to no other conclusion than the obvious: that 'tastes will differ', no matter how the critic tries to intervene. On the latter count, he attacks those critics who attempt to oust judgment from literary criticism altogether, although, at least on the surface, critics like Dallas and Moulton go much further in proposing methods for literary criticism than Robertson.

It is remarkable that the one critic with whom Robertson has, in certain specific respects, most in common should not have been discussed by him at all.[108] John Addington Symonds would seem a strange ideological companion for a staunch rationalist like Robertson, but such, it appears, he is. Symonds and Robertson shared their belief in evolution as a concept which might coordinate all human knowledge, and, more particularly, they agreed on the extent to which science could play a role in literary criticism. Robertson would not have found it difficult to concur with Symonds's statement – already quoted in the previous section – that

> To this extent, then, through the perception of what criticism ought to be, through the definition of its province, and through the recognition of what is inevitably imperfect in its instrument, the method tends to being in its own way scientific.[109]

Although both Robertson and Symonds had great faith in what science might achieve, they also felt that science in criticism had its natural limits, and could not finally solve the great problem of subjective judgment. Moreover, they were both literary moralists first and foremost (although their personal conceptions of morality might have differed a great deal). In fact, since *ETCM* precedes Symonds's article 'On Some Principles of Criticism' by a number of years, one might even speculate whether Symonds was not aware of Robertson's theories, and used them in his own writings. In any case, it is remarkable how such different figures might reach such similar conclusions on such an elusive subject.

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[108] Nor, for that matter, does Symonds seem to have been aware of Robertson's work.

[109] Symonds, 'On Some Principles of Criticism', *Essays, Speculative and Suggestive*, p. 78.

The paradoxical truth seems to be that Robertson, like Symonds, is actually not interested in *methods* for literary criticism at all. Both *ETCM* and *NETCM*, in fact, constitute elaborate inducements to *method*. It is not *a* system that he is seeking, but a generally more systematic approach to literature. This plea, in spite of the fact that it is voiced in often outdated evolutionary/scientific jargon, is an important one. We must not forget that Robertson wrote his treatises at a juncture in critical history when, at least in numerical terms, criticism was blooming as never before, with myriads of literary periodicals professing even more myriads of literary opinions. Small surprise, then, that a rationalist like Robertson should feel the need for some degree of coordination, and small surprise, too, that he went about his business in the way that was most natural to him: not by framing elaborate – but ultimately hollow – systems of critical analysis, but by being, in fact, a critic proper.

Reading *ETCM* and *NETCM* does not perhaps leave one with the impression that one has met with a great impetus to new critical practice on a systematic basis. That much has to be granted. Nor can it be said that Robertson's theoretical approach to literary criticism anticipates other than coincidentally critical views which are *de rigoeur* in this present post–modern, post–structuralist age. However, Robertson's writings on science and literary criticism do leave one with an acute sense of having been in the presence of a powerful, independent critic, whose opinions on literary and literary–critical subjects are his own, and are based on the authority of wide reading and sharp insight into the complex issues involved in literary analysis. When dealing with such systematizers as Taine, Hennequin, Dallas, or Moulton, Robertson may profess initial admiration for their scientific intentions, but he then cuts straight to the core of the problem: that these critics are insufficiently aware of the often dubious premises on which they base their suppositions. When Taine sees *race*, *milieu*, and *moment* as the driving forces behind literary creation, Robertson sharply exposes the randomness of Taine's choice of causes; when Moulton and Howells propose to eliminate the subjective element from criticism, Robertson shows up the subjectivity of their own literary standards. Even Hennequin, whose work Robertson greatly admires, does not escape scot–free, and it almost seems as if Robertson is most critical of those theorists with whom his ideological kinship is the greatest. In the end, Robertson as a theorist of criticism is above all a most effective critic of other critics' theories, and should be valued as such. Whether he is as effective when dealing critically not with theory but with actual literary texts is what the following chapter will set out to answer.

Chapter 4

ROBERTSON ON DRAMA, FICTION, AND POETRY

Introduction

Moving from Robertson's theoretical, scientifically inspired views on literary criticism to his actual criticism of literary texts, of *belles lettres* (in Robertson's preferred term) immediately and naturally begs the question in how far Robertson managed to practise what he preached. Do *ETCM* and *NETCM* really provide the theoretical foundation for Robertson's 'practical' criticism of the many dramatists, novelists, and poets whose works he undertook to examine? I think it is important to emphasize from the start that Robertson himself made no secret of the fact that his main theoretical treatises were written *after* the bulk of his essays on specific authors and texts. In the Preface to *NETCM* he admitted that 'It will readily be seen that no one of the studies . . . comes near applying all the tests mentioned in the preliminary essay on 'The Theory and Practice of Criticism' as proper to a critical inquiry.' [*NETCM* v] To make Robertson's adherence to his own theoretical precepts the focal point of an examination of his criticism of drama, fiction, and poetry would therefore be quite beside the point. The fact that Robertson himself was aware that the theory and practice of his criticism existed, as it were, largely on different planes, underscores the need to assess his 'practical' criticism on its own merits.

What should also be clear from the outset is that the following assessment of Robertson's criticism of drama, fiction, and poetry will not constitute an attempt to extol the critic's virtues to the skies by carefully selecting only those of his literary verdicts which show him to be ahead of his time as far as anticipating views which happen to be current today are concerned. To the eye of the present, no critic of the past is, of course, ever completely in the right. It may, for example, be true and commendable that Robertson was able to give high praise to Zola's novels when many of his fellow–critics were far from ready for such a drastic step, but he was at the same time quite incapable of appreciating, say, Dickens and fell in readily enough with the tendencies of his time by assigning much higher literary merit to Thackeray. Few critics would agree with him today (also because the custom of comparing degrees of genius

2has fallen distinctly out of fashion), but this does not mean that the fact itself cannot be of interest from a literary–historical or even biographical point of view. It is the purpose of the present chapter to demonstrate that Robertson's views are those of a critic of strong individual taste and the expression of a powerful personality largely independent of the literary establishment of the age. Whether 'right' or 'wrong', Robertson's voice was one which deserves to be heard alongside those of establishment figures like Gosse and Saintsbury, who have had their fair share of critical attention in the past two decades. The fact that Robertson, as we shall see, could command the respect of a critic like T.S. Eliot, should alone be sufficient justification for a closer examination of his critical practice.

In the following pages, I will examine Robertson's critical work under the three separate headings of Drama, Fiction, and Poetry. To a certain extent, such a division will always remain an artificial one; in the case of Shakespeare, for instance, the author is obviously as much poet as dramatist. Nonetheless the division seems justified here by the necessity to reduce the enormous bulk of Robertson's critical output to manageable proportions. That in itself will be no easy task, since Robertson has written on a multitude of authors and works, and it would be impossible to touch upon his views on all of these within the scope of this study. I have therefore rejected an inclusive approach in favour of a selective one, which should provide a representative impression of Robertson as a practical literary critic, with all his manifold faults and virtues.

Part 1: Robertson on Drama

Introduction

If Robertson is remembered at all in his capacity as a literary critic, it is as a critic of drama, or rather as a Shakespeare critic, since Shakespeare was the subject of most of Robertson's writings on the art of drama. Indeed, Robertson's dauntingly lengthy entry in the British Library General Catalogue proves that Shakespeare criticism took up a considerable portion of the time and energy he managed to spare from so many other large–scale projects. Between 1897 and 1932, the BLGC lists over fifteen titles of works dedicated to the study of Shakespeare's works, and in particular to the question whether the plays commonly known as Shakespeare's were genuinely and completely the playwright's own artistic creation. Robertson did not believe so and he spent many years of intense study of the Elizabethan drama trying to prove that they were in fact the products of composite authorship rather than of a single hand, always insisting on the necessity of a rigorously scientific approach to the problem. He thus became known as a Shakespearean 'disintegrator': one who

breaks down the Shakespeare plays into many small pieces on the basis of internal evidence, and assigns them to different contemporary playwrights such as Marlowe, Greene, or Peele. The theory generated a good deal of controversy, and we will have occasion to examine how it fared both in Robertson's lifetime and after his death.

An overview of Robertson's main titles in this field may give some impression of the sheer scale of his work as a Shakespearean scholar. In 1897, Robertson published his *Montaigne and Shakspere*, a study of the French essayist's influence on Shakespeare which had originally appeared in 1896 as a series of magazine articles.[1] This book was followed in 1905 by *Did Shakespeare Write Titus Andronicus?*, an investigation into the true authorship of the play.[2] In 1913, Robertson published a voluminous refutation of any claims (held, for instance, by Mark Twain) to the Baconian authorship of the Shakespeare plays, entitled *The Baconian Heresy. A Confutation*.[3] A year later, Shakespeare also took pride of place in *Elizabethan Literature*, an introduction to the subject published for the Home University Library of Modern Knowledge. This useful little work was followed in 1917 by *Shakespeare and Chapman*, which was elaborately subtitled 'a thesis of Chapman's authorship of "A Lover's Complaint," and his origination of "Timon of Athens" with indications of further problems'. In 1919, Robertson published *The Problem of "Hamlet"*, a pamphlet on the complex genesis of *Hamlet*, which, as we shall see, was not to remain without influence, mainly through the intervention of T.S. Eliot. Robertson's theory about the play dates as far back as 1885, when, while still under the wings of Mrs. Besant, he published an article in *Our Corner* entitled 'The Upshot of "Hamlet"'.[4] There we may witness Robertson taking his first steps on the long and winding road which he was to follow for

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[1] The book was reprinted in 1909 as *Montaigne and Shakespeare and Other Essays on Cognate Questions*, adding essays on 'The Originality of Shakespeare' and 'The Learning of Shakespeare' which also first saw the light in the periodical press in 1898. At the time of the first edition, 'Shakspere' was Robertson's preferred spelling, but he subsequently revised this view.

[2] A greatly expanded edition of this book appeared in 1924 under the title *An Introduction to the Study of the Shakespeare Canon, Proceeding on the Problem of "Titus Andronicus"*.

[3] An equally voluminous reply to *The Baconian Heresy* was published by Robertson's good friend Sir George Greenwood under the title *Is there a Shakespeare Problem?* (London, 1916). Other polemical books by Greenwood in which he attempted to undermine Robertson's theories on Shakespeare authorship are *The Shakespeare Problem Restated* (London, 1908), and *Shakespeare's Law and Latin. How I was "exposed" by Mr. J.M. Robertson* (London, 1916).

[4] Arthur Gigadibs [i.e. J.M. Robertson], 'The Upshot of "Hamlet"', *Our Corner*, 5 (1885), pp. 142–9. 212–20, 275–83, 353–60.

the rest of his life, in pursuit of the establishment of the true Shakespeare canon.

This quest finally culminated in the publication of his *magnum opus*, the five volumes of *The Shakespeare Canon*, the first of which appeared in 1922; the final volume was not published until ten years later, a year before Robertson's death. The five volumes form a monument of Shakespeare scholarship, but whether the work has enduring qualities is a question that needs to be addressed later in this chapter. For the moment, we pick up our thread again in 1923, when Robertson returned to *Hamlet* with *"Hamlet" Once More*, which is mainly a polemical answer to A. Clutton–Brock's criticism of the earlier pamphlet.[5] Three years later, in 1926, Robertson turned from the authorship of the plays to that of the sonnets, with *The Problems of the Shakespeare Sonnets*, again an attempt at a definitive settling of a highly controversial problem. His findings with regard to the Shakespeare canon were subsequently summarized in *The Genuine in Shakespeare. A Conspectus* of 1930, which, for a student new to Robertson's Shakespeare criticism, is probably the best place to start. The following year was a particularly prolific one; 1931 saw the publication of two books on Shakespeare and one on Marlowe, who, Robertson argued, had had an important share in Shakespeare's early work. The first Shakespeare study of that year was *The State of Shakespeare Study. A Critical Conspectus*, an extremely critical – acerbic would perhaps not be too strong a term – survey of contemporary work in Shakespeare scholarship. For the second book, *Literary Detection. A Symposium on Macbeth*, Robertson adopted a somewhat unusual format by presenting his attempt to determine the authorship of *Macbeth* in the form of a (highly) literary conversation between four learned amateurs in Shakespeare scholarship. The study of Marlowe of the same year was entitled *Marlowe. A Conspectus*, and subjected the works of that author to the same critical scrutiny as the Shakespeare plays, again with a view to establishing their real authorship, and also to determine Marlowe's share in the Shakespearean plays.

This list becomes perhaps slightly less daunting when we take into account that there is in fact a great deal of overlap to be found in Robertson's books on Shakespeare. As in his non–literary work, Robertson is a man with a mission which he will not allow his readers to lose sight of. Again and again, he relentlessly pursues the same topics, so that the impression is easily gained that a smaller number of volumes would have sufficed to give currency to his theories and ideas. It should be remembered, however, that Robertson was

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[5] A. Clutton–Brock, *Shakespeare's "Hamlet"* (London, 1922).

never a rich man, and that spreading himself somewhat thin may well have been as much an economic as a psychological necessity.[6]

In addition to his books, Robertson also published a number of periodical articles, the most important of which appeared in Eliot's *Criterion*, as well as pamphlets and lectures. He was an Honorary Associate of the Shakespeare Association and corresponded with such Shakespeare luminaries as John Dover Wilson, Richard Garnett, E.K. Chambers, Sidney Lee, E.W. Lummis, and A.W. Pollard.[7] As radical a polemicist and controversialist in Shakespearean studies as in religious and philosophical matters, he seldom let slip an opportunity to respond to some new critical theory which did not correspond with his own disintegrationist views. In fact, many of the above works are extensive polemical disparagements of the theories of other scholars, in particular those who had the audacity to accept the Folio as entirely by Shakespeare's hand, as did his arch–enemy Sir Edmund Kerchever Chambers, whom we will meet again later in these pages. Taking all this restless wandering in the wide field of Shakespeare studies into account, it is not as surprising as it might at first glance appear that in 1919 Robertson should speak of 'a lifetime rather largely devoted to Shakespeare study'.[8] Whether it was a lifetime well spent is a question that will need to be examined in the following pages.

However, before embarking on a closer study of Robertson's Shakespeare criticism, a few remarks are perhaps in order about the fact that Robertson had so little attention to spare for the contemporary theatre. In the mid 1880s, when his friend and fellow critic William Archer was attempting to prepare London theatre–goers for the reception of the bleak world of Henrik Ibsen, Robertson decided to look to the past instead of the future (as far as drama was concerned), and immersed himself in the fine intricacies of Elizabethan textual criticism. In fact, the most extensive discussion of the drama of his own age appears in a long essay on 'Evolution in Drama' of 1886.[9] There, Robertson finds himself having to conclude at the end of a sweeping survey of over two thousand years of dramatic history that 'our best playwrights have produced nothing that approaches in value and importance to our best fiction, while by

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[6] In the Preface to his *Literary Detection. A Symposium on "Macbeth"*, Robertson complains that *The Shakespeare Canon* 'is in the financial sense a thoroughly unprofitable undertaking', which he adduces as his reason for aiming at 'a more popular mode of inquiry'.

[7] Robertson's letters to John Dover Wilson (eight in all) are in the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, as is a letter to A.W. Pollard; a letter to Richard Garnett is in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at Austin, Texas; three letters to E.W. Lummis are in the Houghton Library, Harvard; the Bodleian Library, Oxford, has a letter to Sidney Lee and one to E.K. Chambers.

[8] *The Problem of "Hamlet"* (London, 1919), p. 7.

[9] 'Evolution in Drama', *Our Corner*, 7 (1886), pp. 143–53, 225–31, 275–83, 333–41.

far the greater part of our acted plays are simply beneath serious criticism.'[10] Robertson paints a vivid picture of the 'roaring melodramas at which a patriotic audience is thrilled to blatant ecstasy by scenic suggestions of our last campaign against one of the inferior races'.[11] A performance in a London theatre of a play by Ibsen, 'who seems a hundred years ahead of us' seemed almost inconceivable: 'Such a play in such a place before such an audience, would seem to blow the roof off.' [12]

Nonetheless, Robertson was not an unqualified admirer of the work of the Norwegian playwright, feeling that 'that strong and bitter spirit is partly warped by his own keen perception of human weaknesses and baseness.'[13] Clearly, Robertson's deeply–rooted evolutionary optimism made complete sympathy with Ibsen's dark outlook on life impossible. What he looked for in drama was finally not to be found in the theatre of his own time; in fact, he had already found it in Shakespeare's creations.

The Science of Shakespeare Criticism

Robertson's entire work on Shakespeare may be said to have started from the premise that before any critical statements could be uttered about Shakespeare's writings or personality, the question of the authorship of the so–called Shakespearean plays should first be settled. In his book on *Montaigne and Shakespeare*, he stressed the dependence of all problems in Shakespeare criticism on this particular issue:

> The nature of Shakespeare's culture–preparation and moral bias cannot be put with precision and comprehensiveness until we settle what is and what is not genuine in the plays attributed to him; and in so far as points of chronology turn on points of style, it is necessary to make sure whose style we are reading at any point in the series. Nor, until that be settled, can there be certainty of judgment all along the line as to the ethical content of the dramas. Yet, thus far, the interdependence of the problems in question has hardly been realised.[14]

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[10] 'Evolution in Drama', p. 280.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 281.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 336. In fact, this is not a bad description of the turmoil that broke loose when William Archer's rendering of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was produced in 1889, three years after the writing of this essay.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 336.

[14] *Montaigne and Shakespeare and Other Essays on Cognate Questions*, p. 28.

He proposed to remedy this lack of a solid foundation for all Shakespeare studies by approaching the issue in the manner familiar from the previous chapter: by adopting the methods of science:

> Scrutiny of the problems of authorship in Elizabethan drama is equally a pursuit to be conducted in the scientific spirit, with a concern for testable inference such as is only latterly emerging. Without loyalty to inductive method it is but a procedure of literary or aesthetic impressionism not recognisable as scientific in any sense.[15]

Robertson claimed that it was the persistent lack of scientific methodology in Shakespeare studies which had led to the establishment of a number of 'wild' theories regarding the authorship of the plays:

> Sheer apriorism, on a basis of minimum knowledge and lawless hypothesis, has yielded all the vain dogmatisms of the series of theories which began with Baconism and has successfully presented Rutlandism, Derbyism and Oxfordism,[16] all destroying each other, none offering reasonable evidence to the rational inquirer. Theirs is the method of speculative ignorance, wholly detached from the procedures of aesthetic and other testation which are indispensable to any induction worthy of the name.[17]

Clearly, Robertson is as much the scientific rationalist in studies of Shakespeare as elsewhere. In fact, one might say that in his work on the authorship question, his claim to the scientific status of his methods is put forward with even greater emphasis. When he approached the problems of scientific criticism from a theoretical point of view in *ETCM* and *NETCM*, Robertson still left considerable room for the influence of subjective value judgment. However, when it comes to the practical issue of authorship attribution, he allows for no such leniency, and again and again stresses the overall scientific objectivity of his critical technique. There is no doubt that he

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[15] *Marlowe. A Conspectus*, p. 46.

[16] In the course of the debate on Shakespearean authorship, Francis Bacon, Roger Manners (Earl of Rutland), William Stanley (Earl of Derby), and Edward de Vere (Earl of Oxford) have been the main 'candidates for Shakespeare'. In *Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (London, 1996), p. 37, John Michell lists these candidates in order of popularity, judged by the number of books and articles which have been published in their support: Baconism takes the lead, followed by Oxfordism, Derbyism, and Rutlandism.

[17] *Marlowe. A Conspectus*, p. 46.

felt that, as far as the authorship question was concerned, scientific method put definitive answers within his reach.

The New Shakspere Society: Furnivall and Fleay

In order to gain an impression of the origin and exact nature of Robertson's scientific methods, we will have to go back in the history of Shakespeare studies by a number of years until we reach 1873, the year in which the remarkable Dr. Frederick James Furnivall (1825–1910) founded the New Shakspere Society.[18] Furnivall was the very embodiment of the Victorian spirit of work, and a firm believer in the accomplishments of science. His most enduring claim to fame is perhaps his contribution to the *New English Dictionary* (later to become the *Oxford English Dictionary*), a project which he originally proposed himself and of which he became the particularly energetic and inspiring editor in 1861. Furnivall's talents as an organizer were prodigious, and he was the founder of a number of literary societies, which, as his biographer states, 'became the most powerful force in Victorian England for the advancement of English studies.'[19] In 1864 he founded the Early English Text Society, his patriotic goal being to make available to modern English readers the thoughts and ideas of their forefathers in accurate, well-glossed editions. The Society proved of inestimable value to the study of medieval literature, and gave rise to a whole new movement of modern textual scholarship. Other societies Furnivall established included the Chaucer Society (1868), the Browning Society (1881), and the Shelley Society (1886), none of which could, however, rival the success of the Early English Text Society.

In the 'Founder's Prospectus' of the New Shakspere Society, Furnivall announced the goal of his new enterprise as the establishment of a Shakespearean canon of authorship and chronology along scientific lines. Surely 'in this Victorian time, when our Geniuses of Science are so wresting her secrets from Nature as to make our days memorable for ever', it should be possible to achieve similar results in Shakespeare studies.[20] At the first meeting of the new society on March 13, 1874, Furnivall further specified its purpose, which was

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[18] Unless the notes indicate otherwise, the information on Furnivall presented here is taken from William Benzie, *Dr. F.J. Furnivall. A Victorian Scholar Adventurer* (Norman, 1983). 'Shakspere', incidentally, was the spelling to which Furnivall gave currency, and which was also adopted by Robertson, as we saw, in the early stages of his career.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

[20] F.J. Furnivall, 'The New Shakspere Society: The Founder's Prospectus Revised', *New Shakspere Society Transactions*, vol. 1, Appendix (London, 1874), p. 7.

> by a very close study of the metrical and phraseological peculiarities of Shakspere, to get his plays as nearly as possible into the order in which he wrote them . . . and then to use that revised order for the purpose of studying the progress and meaning of Shakspere's mind . . .[21]

The scholar who was given the daunting task to establish the order of the plays by means of metrical tests was the Reverend Frederick Gard Fleay, like Furnivall a man of tremendous energy.[22] At Trinity College, Cambridge, where he received a thorough education in mathematics and the natural sciences, his dedication to his studies earned him the label 'the industrious flea'. We have already seen in the previous chapter how Fleay felt that no critic might call himself 'scientific' unless he 'had a thorough training in the Natural Sciences, especially in Mineralogy, classificatory Botany, and above all, in Chemical Analysis.'[23] Being well–versed in all these fields, he regarded himself as eminently equipped for his task, which he described as follows:

> Our analysis, which has hitherto been qualitative, must become quantitative; we must cease to be empirical, and become scientific; in criticism as in other matters, the test that decides between science and empiricism is this: "Can you say, not only of what kind, but how much? If you cannot weigh, measure, number your results, however you may be convinced yourself, you must not hope to convince others, or claim the position of an investigator; you are merely a guesser, a propounder of hypotheses."[24]

Fleay applied himself to his assignment with characteristic vigour, and he accordingly gave most of the first papers at the society, all of which exemplify his quantitative approach to textual criticism.[25] For this purpose, he advocated the use of metrical tables, charting, for instance, the number of lines with double endings, the number of rhyming lines, or the number of lines with more or less than five measures. In this way, the scientific critic was to establish objectively a particular author's technical development, with a view to determining the chronology and authorship of his works.

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[21] Furnivall, quoted in 'Notices of Meetings', *ibid.*, p. vi.

[22] All biographical information on Fleay is taken from the D.N.B. entry.

[23] F.G. Fleay, *Shakspere Manual* (London, 1878), p. 108.

[24] F.G. Fleay, 'On Metrical Tests as Applied to Dramatic Poetry', *New Shakspere Society Transactions*, vol. 1 (London, 1874), p. 2.

[25] These were later reprinted in his *Shakspere Manual.*

Samuel Schoenbaum has pointed out the eccentricities of some of the results Fleay obtained in this way.[26] Chronologically, for instance, Fleay made *Macbeth* precede *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear*; he assigned *The Taming of the Shrew* to 1600, *Cymbeline* to 1604, and *Julius Caesar* to 1607. As to authorship, he suspected Jonson's hand in *Julius Caesar* while doubting the Shakespearean authorship of the Porter scene in *Macbeth*. Unfortunately and ironically enough, all these unorthodox views were based on often highly inaccurate data (Schoenbaum comments that 'the mysteries of simple arithmetic seem always to elude his grasp') and the most subjective of value judgments. Take, for instance, such a statement as the following on *Julius Caesar*:

> There is a strange feeling about the general style of this play; which is not the style of Jonson: but just what one would fancy Shakespeare would become with an infusion of Jonson. I do not give passages here; as I look on the printing of long extracts from books in every one's hands, except for cases of comparison, as useless and wasteful. I prefer relying on the taste and judgment of those who will take the trouble to read the play and judge for themselves.[27]

If criticism is after all a matter of 'taste and judgment', one may well inquire into the use of metrical tables and tests. It was not long before even Furnivall became distinctly disenchanted with the speculations and inaccuracies of his one-time torchbearer, and by the end of 1874, he and Fleay were no longer on speaking terms. Furnivall himself continued to do much work on metrical questions, but in spite of his scientific pretensions, he was essentially an old-fashioned patriotic moralist and romantic who yearned to see the Bard as one 'in whom we may fancy that the Stratford both of his early and late days lives again', and of whom it could be believed that 'the daughters he saw there, the sweet English maidens, the pleasant country scenes around him, passt [*sic*] as it were again into his plays.'[28] No metrical tables could in any way alter for him this luxuriant image of the greatest English genius of all time.

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[26] S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 351–2.

[27] Fleay, *Shakspere Manual*, p. 265.

[28] Furnivall, *New Shakspere Society Transactions*, vol. 1 (London, 1874), p. vi. The spelling 'passt' is the result of Furnivall's interest in spelling reform. For his romantic and moralistic leanings, see also Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London, 1990), pp. 164–7.

Robertson's Use of Verse-Tests

If we now return to the work of Robertson on Shakespeare, we find that he was profoundly influenced by the methods and approach of the New Shakspere Society, although he credited Furnivall himself with but little critical insight. 'Furnivall's service to Shakespeare study by running the old New Shakespere [*sic*] Society', he made one of the speakers in his *Symposium on Macbeth* remark, 'may have been great, as was his service to Chaucer study; but his contribution of critical ideas was not much above zero.'[29] Robertson found himself much more attracted to the stark quantitative methodology of F.G. Fleay, with whose conclusions he may have been in frequent disagreement, but to whose pioneering influence he paid tribute throughout his own work, feeling that 'no man . . . has contributed so large a number of really illuminating ideas to the investigation of the field of literary history with which we are here concerned.'[30]

Following in Fleay's footsteps, Robertson developed his own system of metrical tests to separate the authentic wheat from the non-Shakespearean chaff, based on a particular theory with regard to the evolution of English blank verse. This theory permeates the whole of his Shakespearean work, but is most compactly and accessibly set forth in an article on the subject for the *Criterion* of February 1924.[31] Robertson effectively sees the evolution of English blank verse as a process of gradual liberation from the restrictions of the single end-stopped line. English blank verse is commonly held to begin with the Earl of Surrey's translation of the second and fourth books of the *Aeneid*, written about 1540, and first printed in Tottel's *Miscellany* of 1557. Surrey, Robertson argues, found his inspiration in the advanced verse-forms of Italian poetry, from which, however, he 'takes . . . only the dismissal of rhyme.' [177] Following the traditional English practice of monosyllabic rhyme, Surrey still 'ends nearly every line on a stress' [176], although his poetic genius enables him to transcend the limitations of this format through 'the free play of fluid rhythm'. [177] Robertson quotes with approval John Addington Symonds's insistence that 'though blank verse is an iambic rhythm, it owes its beauty to the liberties taken with the normal structure.'[32] Within the restrictions of the end-stopped line, Surrey himself was capable of great rhythmic variation, but successors like Sackville and Norton never attain his measure of rhythmic

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[29] *Literary Detection. A Symposium on Macbeth*, p. 56.

[30] *An Introduction to the Study of the Shakespeare Canon*, p. 23.

[31] 'The Evolution of English Blank Verse', *Criterion*, 2 (1924), pp. 171–87. Page numbers referring to this article are given in brackets in the main text. Robertson's *Elizabethan Literature* provides a more detailed introduction to the subject.

[32] J.A. Symonds, *Blank Verse* (London, 1895), p. 1.

freedom: 'They are good and careful writers, sound in their diction; what kills their verse is fatal iambic regularity.' [179]

It was, in fact, only with Christopher Marlowe that 'English blank verse emerges as a tested and powerful instrument.' [181] Robertson greets Marlowe as

> a signal master of line – the characteristic by which Jonson commemorates him. Relatively to the pedestrian gait of Kyd, the short and eager trip of Greene, and the flaccid fluency of Peele, his lines bound: he is the swift–foot Achilles alongside of the lesser men. [182]

Marlowe's notable innovation was the persistent use of the double–ending as 'an inevitable relief to the ultimate formal monotony of the decasyllabic metre'.[33] [184] Robertson felt that Marlowe was able to carry the use of this metrical variation further than any contemporary, and certainly further than Thomas Kyd, who attempted to emulate Marlowe's example, but 'never became a rhythmist up to Marlowe's limit.' [182] In fact, he went so far as to say that not even Shakespeare could outdo Marlowe in the 'nude, elemental strength' of his single lines, of which Robertson quotes as an example the famous 'Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?'

However, it was only in such rare instances that Marlowe could rise to the same level as Shakespeare, since it was with the latter that 'for the first time, and at once for all time, do we realise what blank verse can be, in the hands of one who is at once the master rhythmist and the master–poet.' [182] Robertson argued that Shakespeare had little need for such a relatively mechanical device as the double–ending, which could, at most, effect a relief from monotonous regularity within the line:

> Shakespeare had from the start added to unshackled variety of stress *within* the line the new spell of interfluent sense, under which the line is but the silken robe of the verse, the pauses varying endlessly, so that the line is felt only as a pulsation in the movement that may pause anywhere, recommencing at any point within the metre. Only when the ever–increasing pregnancy of the verse has compelled a condensation of the style does Shakespeare avail himself of the double–ending to anything like the extent to which Marlowe was doing at his close. The later developments of Shakespeare's verse are in the direction of an ever more untrammelled – we might say a more masterly careless – freedom

[33] A double–ending is a line ending with an extra syllable, as in 'To be or not to be, that is the *question*.'

> in deviation from the norm, making the result always more dramatic. [184]

Robertson was, in fact, so convinced of the infinite virtuosity of Shakespeare's handling of blank verse that he asserted without hesitation that 'In Shakespeare, runs of double-endings beyond three or four lines are always a ground for a suspicion of an alien basis . . . , so sure is his sense of balance.' [185] Certainly, among Shakespeare's contemporaries no Marston, Dekker, Jonson, Beaumont, Massinger, or Fletcher – whatever their respective qualities – could hope to attain such a mastery of blank verse; taking giant strides through literary history, Robertson finds no equals to Shakespeare even in more recent times, so that even his beloved Tennyson must satisfy himself with a remote second place. The final conclusion is inevitable: 'No blank verse has ever transcended Shakespeare's.' [187]

The Disintegration of the Shakespeare Canon

Armed with this conception of Shakespeare's greatness as a master of dramatic versification, Robertson proceeded to attack the Shakespeare canon, verse tests providing his main ammunition. As we shall see, these were not the only tools he used to 'disintegrate' the plays, but they did form the basis for his approach. It is, perhaps surprisingly, not the five volumes of *The Shakespeare Canon* which supply the best insight into his methodology. Although they represent a *tour de force* of Elizabethan scholarship, they are rendered relatively unreadable by a marked over-abundance of detail and excess of polemical content. A much more accessible guide to Robertson's scholarly work is provided by the volume entitled *The Genuine in Shakespeare. A Conspectus* of 1930, in which he conveniently summarizes his findings on the canon, and suppresses his inclination to relentlessly chase after his enemies in all kinds of directions.[34] Robertson, it should be admitted, is generally at his best when he does not allow himself too much space, a fact of which he himself was regrettably not always sufficiently aware.

In the early pages of the book, Robertson demonstrates the importance of verse tests by applying them to the case of the *Comedy of Errors*. His confident claim is that 'A quite dispassionate study will probably lead us to the conclusion that the earliest surviving dramatic writing by Shakespeare is the first scene of the *Comedy of Errors*.' [11] In that particular scene, 'easily fluent without poignancy' [14], Robertson counts only three double-endings, whereas in Scene ii, 24 out of 103 blank-verse lines end in an extra syllable. Moreover,

[34] Page numbers referring to this book are given in brackets in the main text.

he finds the versification in the second scene of quite a different order, so that he sets up the following line of argument:

> We who compare them carefully can see that Scene ii of the *Errors* is not Shakespeare's at all. Not only has it all those double–endings, its verse is in general *end–stopped*: that is to say, the sense and the rhythm generally end with the line, and even the sense is rarely "run on." In the first scene, on the contrary, 20 per cent of the lines "run on," and this mostly both in syntax and in rhythm. Here we have, in visibly early matter, the first vital difference between Shakespearean and pre–Shakespearean verse. The beginner is indeed writing *like* a beginner, not in the great style, yet in his own; and though the poetry is *for him* third–rate it *is* poetry. Scene ii is not only end–stopped and heavy with double–endings: it is in the main prosaic, in a way that Shakespeare is never prosaic in his demonstrable genuine work. [15–16]

On this basis, Robertson concludes that the second scene – and, in fact, most of the play – was written by Marlowe, a claim first made by Fleay several decades earlier.

Having thus set about his task, Robertson soon finds the Shakespeare canon collapsing under his hands. To summarize his theories on all of the separate plays would require a great many pages, but even a few examples may illustrate here how startlingly destructive Robertson's disintegrating work must have appeared to those scholars who believed the Folio to be by a single hand. In fact, only *A Midsummer–Night's Dream* is allowed by him to be entirely of Shakespeare's own devising, in both construction and versification. At the other end of the scale, a number of plays (*Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*) are forthrightly dismissed as having nothing to do with Shakespeare whatsoever. Between these two extremes, Shakespeare is represented as having a varying stake in the plays we have come to know as his. In *Romeo and Juliet* or *Julius Caesar*, for instance, Shakespeare has to share the honours of authorship with a colourful band of Elizabethan colleagues, such as Marlowe, Greene, Heywood, and Chapman (although Robertson is always quick to point out that their contributions are quite inferior to Shakespeare's). In other cases, such as in the great tragedies *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, the voice we listen to may be genuinely Shakespeare's in versification, but even there the master playwright is adapting older, sometimes intractable material, which, Robertson felt, accounts for some of the defects of construction in the plays.

Shakespeare and the Influence of the Audience

There emerges from Robertson's disintegration of the canon along the lines sketched above an image of Shakespeare which is a far cry from the heavily romanticised conception of the Great Bard which dominated nineteenth-century Shakespeare studies, and to which even a self-professed scientific critic like Furnivall, as we saw, fell an easy prey. In this context, Schoenbaum discusses Edward Dowden's *Shakspere: A Critical Study of His Mind*, an immensely influential study which was first published in 1875 and went through a great many editions. Dowden, Schoenbaum comments, tended to see Shakespeare's *oeuvre* as an autobiographical poem, in which 'the autobiography holds more importance than the poem.'[35] It was the mind of the creator which, for Dowden, ranked high above the artistic creations themselves, and the critic's engagement with that mind became a struggle of almost biblical proportions:

> There is something higher and more wonderful than St. Peter's, or the Last Judgment – namely, the *mind* which flung these creations into the world. And yet, it is when we make the effort which demands our most concentrated and most sustained energy, – it is when we strive to come into the presence of the living mind of the creator, that the sense of struggle and effort is relieved. . . . There is something in this invigorating struggle with a nature greater than one's own which unavoidably puts on in one's imagination, the shape of the Hebrew story of Peniel. We wrestle with an unknown man until the breaking of the day.[36]

To Robertson the rationalist, such a view of the artist as a divinely inspired being or of biographical criticism as a kind of religious and superhuman struggle went completely against the grain. He was no less convinced than Dowden of Shakespeare's unsurpassable genius, but for him, the critic's struggle was primarily with the *environment* in which Shakespeare produced his timeless creations. Shakespeare as Robertson saw him was, although unquestionably a genius, destined by circumstances to remain above all a practical man of affairs, with both feet planted firmly on Elizabethan soil, and in the Elizabethan theatre. Throughout his work, Robertson insisted again and again that

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[35] Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 356.

[36] *Ibid.*

> To know Shakespeare, we must think of him as the actor–partner catering for his company, concerned primarily to find themes and frame plots that will "draw," and driven alike by his genius and by his experience as an actor to make the characters lifelike.[37]

A unique blend of genius and pragmatist, Shakespeare never thought twice about adapting or revising older work, however inferior to his own. He knew his place and function: 'To please, somehow, the general audience' and 'To that modest end, he used his common sense as he used his singular faculty.'[38] It was one of Robertson's deepest convictions that Shakespeare always deliberately placed his genius at the service of his audience.

We have seen that early in his career, before his main works on Shakespeare were written, Robertson found in the writings of Hennequin the confirmation of his view that the audience was an essential environmental determinant in the creation of literary work. In his essay on 'Evolution in Drama', he argued that this was particularly true of the dramatic art–form:

> [Drama] stands alone in being absolutely shackled from the outset by certain claims of custom which amount to conditions of success. Now, this particular slavery of the dramatist to convention . . . arises out of his relation to his audience; and may therefore fairly be charged on the nature of his art and the state of civilisation. . . . Experiment is not open to him as it is to the painter and even to the composer, both of whom have at all times relied on a comparatively instructed public, capable to some extent of sympathising with their aims and being led forward by them.[39]

In the general evolution of drama, it was not until the reign of Queen Elizabeth that, under the influence of the general flowering of culture, a highly varied audience arose which demanded a theatre vastly different from and superior to anything that had hitherto been available. Thus

> the living drama rose out of the "effective demand" of the populace for the kind of play suited to its taste and capacity; and in the liberty to meet that demand lay the secret of the English evolution. The actors must have audiences; and the playwrights had to cater for their requirements, to the extent even of mixing farce with history and tragedy. Many plays, in rhyme and in prose, had been produced under those conditions by men of small culture:

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[37] *Elizabethan Literature*, p. 184.

[38] *The Genuine in Shakespeare*, p. 37.

[39] 'Evolution in Drama', pp. 144–5.

> it was the need to draw educated as well as uneducated spectators, to please alternately the Court and the commons, that led to the enlistment of educated men, capable of producing dignified and sonorous poetry. From first to last, the economic factor counts.[40]

Robertson sees a clear example of the significance of the 'economic factor', so largely determined by the demands of the audience, in Shakespeare's writing of the poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. On the one hand, these are clearly Shakespeare's, since they evince 'his gift for sheer metrical utterance'. In the composition of the poems, on the other hand, Shakespeare 'had regard neither to propriety of theme, nor originality of phrase, nor congruity of matter.'[41] Robertson finds the reason why such relatively inferior work could still be written by the man who would go on to write a masterpiece like *King Lear* in the circumstances under which it was produced. He maintained that the poems were written 'from hand to mouth' in 1593 and 1594. In those years, the theatres were closed due to the plague, and the necessity to earn his livelihood compelled the young playwright to produce work which paid, but was otherwise outside his normal practice. 'That pressure over', Robertson concluded, 'he shows no more concern for the poetry of mere metrical expatiation, resuming to the task of adapting plays, whereby he has his income.'[42] Catering for the requirements of his audience and thereby for his own, Shakespeare as seen through Robertson's eyes remained a practical man of affairs to the last.

Robertson's Defence of Shakespeare's Genius

Robertson was well aware that such a starkly realistic portrait of Shakespeare, diverging radically from the still prevalent romantic notion of the Great Bard, was bound to raise indignant opposition. If Shakespeare actually wrote so little of what literary history had passed on as his, and if Shakespeare made use so eagerly of material not at all of his own invention, was not the image of the greatest English genius of all time effectively destroyed? Was it still possible to reconstruct such an image from the shattered remains of the Shakespeare canon after Robertson had applied the sledge-hammer of disintegration? As far as Robertson himself was concerned, there was really no need for such reconstruction; what remained was brilliant enough, and at least it was indubitably Shakespeare's own work. As usual, he met his (imaginary) opponents head-on:

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[40] *Elizabethan Literature*, p. 96.
[41] *The Genuine in Shakespeare*, p. 60.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

> All such theses as the above are sure to elicit from many readers – if, that is, many readers chance to see them – a quite spontaneous opposition, in which denial is first posited, and arguments are sought for, if at all, afterwards. It is apt to be hastily inferred that any elimination of matter from the Shakespeare Canon means a diminution of Shakespeare's glory. Yet there could be no greater misapprehension. So far as I know, no attempt at such elimination has ever touched any save inferior or second–rank work – a circumstance which might set objectors thinking. It is always by his sheer superiority that he is or can be finally discriminated. But still men chafe at every suggestion of discrimination.[43]

As for the charge that he left Shakespeare indebted to a host of minor and inferior playwrights and with no faculty of original creation whatsoever, there again we find Robertson well–prepared:

> Had then Shakespeare, it will be asked, no "original" faculty whatever? Does not the very idea of greatness in a sense involve that of originality? I answer that it certainly does, and that the originality of Shakespeare lay precisely in his power (*a*) of transforming and upraising other men's crude creations, (*b*) of putting admirably imagined characters and admirably turned speech where others put unplausible puppets and unreal rhetoric, and (*c*) of rising from the monotonous blank–verse of his predecessors to a species of rhythm as inherently great as that of Milton at his skilfullest, and more nervously powerful, because more dramatic.[44]

What is required, then, from the reader reluctant to accept this 'new' representation of Shakespeare is a fundamental change in perception of the notion of genius, which, Robertson insists, has nothing to do with plot–making or plot–constructing. Its springs lie elsewhere:

> The required genius consists, fundamentally, in the power to conceive and create what we feel to be living personalities; to enter into any kind of soul in any dramatic situation; to make us feel that in each we are listening to a real voice, even in verse, which actual people do not speak. . . . But when this creative gift, as we call it, is turned to the utterance in consummately rhythmical verse of every grade of thought and feeling and passion, playing

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[43] *Shakespeare and Chapman*, pp. 274–5.

[44] 'The Originality of Shakespeare', in *Montaigne and Shakespeare and Other Essays on Cognate Questions*, p. 265.

> over the whole keyboard of humanity, it achieves a still more marvellous mastery of our souls, because it has conjoined the function of verbal self-portraiture with the function of poetry in the greatest of all poetic media.[45]

In the great tragedies in particular, Shakespeare was capable of fusing the creation of living characters with great poetry in a way which no playwright before or after him ever achieved, even though the circumstances of the contemporary theatre world may have induced him to take already existing material as his starting-point. Where such material often seemed to have little life left in it, Shakespeare revived it, and transfigured it into drama worthy of his genius.

It is precisely this balance between character-creation and poetic invention which Robertson finds lacking in the playwright whom he ranked second after Shakespeare himself: Christopher Marlowe. Robertson is undeniably a genuine admirer of Marlowe, whom he gave the credit for radically thrusting English drama into a new phase of its evolution by the sheer power of his innovative versification:

> The advent of Marlowe in the drama is somewhat like the portent of his *Tamburlaine* in the field of history. At one stroke a new and exorbitant energy makes a clean sweep of existing conventions, and barbaric force drives its path athwart the overthrown pretensions of all who had held the ground. . . . Such a picture of savage megalomania had never before been staged; such thunderous force of rhythmic phrase had never yet been found possible in any modern language.[46]

But powerful versification alone, however ground-breaking, does not make effective drama, and *Tamburlaine* 'cannot live through five so-called Acts to any good dramatic purpose.'[47] Ultimately, Tamburlaine the man fails to evolve into a living character. Some of the speeches Marlowe puts in his mouth may admittedly be powerful poetry, such as the one where Tamburlaine holds forth on the question 'What is beauty?':

> If all the pens that ever poets held
> Had fed the feeling of their masters' thought,
> . . .
> Yet should there hover in their restless heads

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[45] *The Genuine in Shakespeare*, pp. 30–1.
[46] *Elizabethan Literature*, pp. 101–2.
[47] *Marlowe. A Conspectus*, p. 60.

> One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
> Which into words no virtue could digest.[48]

However, Robertson felt that such a speech grossly defied 'the dramatic law of congruity' by the sheer unlikelihood of its coming from the ruthless conqueror himself.[49] As in all his plays, however splendid in particular aspects, Marlowe's 'passion for the utmost things'[50] stood in the way of achieving the required balance between poetry and character–creation.

In the case of that other famous contemporary of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Robertson felt that there the problems were decidedly to be found on the side of naturalistic character–creation. Discussing the characters in *Volpone*, he found them to be less than alive:

> These personified vices, virtues, passions, and foibles, baldly labelled as such, are painted from nothing and resemble nothing . . . Falstaff, if you will, is a caricature, the raciest ever drawn, known as such by the facts that (1) he moves mirth in a cultured reader, which Jonson, broadly speaking, never does; and (2) he can be readily conceived in any Shaksperean group of English characters, joining congruously in talk and action, though always in the burlesque key. Jonson's types, on the other hand, are unthinkable in their own or any other environment.[51]

The highest praise Robertson can muster for Jonson is finally that he is 'massive in his very futility',[52] which hardly points to a deep and abiding faith in Jonson's dramatic powers. In Robertson's final summing–up, 'Jonson's comedy is joyless, and his serried tragedy cold.'[53]

Character–creation aside, Robertson clearly finds himself repelled by the sardonic and exaggerated realism of Jonson's comedies, which hardly breathe the kind of uplifting 'life–giving spirit' that he finds in Shakespeare. Where Jonson's cynicism seems to be dragging humanity (further) into the mire, Shakespeare for Robertson represents the greatest humanizing force in the history of English drama, and indeed, of all English literature. In the end, it is Shakespeare's morality which places him above Jonson, Marlowe, and all others, not his craftsmanship, and Robertson does not hesitate to claim that 'a perception of Shakespeare's moral sanity is a main element in our total

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[48] Quoted from *Elizabethan Literature*, p. 102.
[49] *Marlowe. A Conspectus*, p. 4.
[50] *Elizabethan Literature*, p. 102.
[51] *ETCM*, p. 78.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[53] *Elizabethan Literature*, p. 226.

perception of him.'[54] In fact, it would not go too far to say that for Robertson, it was at bottom *the* main element. Considering Robertson's all-pervading positivist, progressionist rationalism, we should perhaps not be surprised that underlying all the praise of Shakespeare's ability to write unsurpassable poetry, we finally discover the profound belief that Shakespeare was 'the true humanist of his age'.[55] Whether such a belief provides the best basis for a scientific, objective approach to the Shakespeare canon is another matter.

Chambers's and Dover Wilson's Criticism of Robertson: Disintegration Disintegrated

It was, in any case, a belief that Robertson was willing to defend to the death (as he almost literally did), which may without hesitation be said of his entire theory of the disintegration of the Shakespeare canon. With grim seriousness, he mercilessly attacked anyone who dared to try and invade his territory, and of those there were indeed many through the years. As a result, much of Robertson's work on Shakespeare represents the record of a polemical battlefield, with the corpses of his scholarly assailants lying scattered all about. It seems, however, that posterity has decided that Robertson did not win his battle, and he is now but seldom read, no doubt partly because many of the once hotly-debated issues he addressed have now become obsolete. As far as his reputation is concerned, Robertson would have done himself a service by adopting somewhat more graceful tactics and by being somewhat less eager to chase after his enemies, but that, indeed, would have gone entirely against his nature. A polemicist to the core, polemize he must.

Robertson's chief animus is directed against those critics who were willing to accept the entire Folio as by Shakespeare's hand, and he dubs them 'idolaters' or 'Foliolaters'. As Schoenbaum remarks, he shows himself not a little sensitive to his own lack of formal training, and 'irritably conscious of being outside the academic establishment' when he attacks the 'academics' to whom he mainly attributes such 'idolatrous' views.[56] The following is a characteristic sample of his disparagement of the 'academic' position:

> Hence, even in the far-scattered world of academic studies, where above all one looks for scientific investigation, the output of serious research includes only a small quantity of intellectually disinterested and 'emancipated' Shakespearean work. In Biblical

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[54] *The Genuine in Shakespeare*, p. 10.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

[56] S. Schoenbaum, *Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship* (Evanston, 1966), p. 109.

> criticism, investigation has been carried on largely by professional scholars and theologians, on whom the problems involved were forced as a result of more than a century of earnest challenge and inquiry. In Shakespeare–study, so far, there has been no such effective impulsion. Its problems have been, as it were, static – the 'philological' scrutiny of texts and phraseology. Professors who have been expounding Shakespeare on that scholarly basis are as a rule very much unprepared for any large extension of the challenge to the authenticity of the Folio plays; though they have had to deal as best they can with the more limited challenges of the past. Even the newer bibliographical inquiries find them rather unresponsive. More radical changes simply repel them.[57]

Robertson was always ready to strike out against the spirit of conservatism whenever he thought he met it, and this was no different when it came to Shakespeare scholarship.

The 'Foliolater' against whom most of his attacks were directed was Sir Edmund Kerchever Chambers, the 'Grand Mandarin of the moment', as Robertson called him in one place.[58] Chambers was, in fact, as much unlike a mandarin as can be imagined, nor was he an academic.[59] For most of his life, Chambers worked for the Board of Education, where he eventually made it to Second Secretary. When he was knighted in 1925, it was as much in recognition of his services to education as to literature. Nonetheless, those services to literature, and in particular to Elizabethan scholarship, were considerable. His major works on the history of drama were *The Mediaeval Stage* (2 vols, 1903), *The Elizabethan Stage* (4 vols, 1923), and *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (2 vols, 1930), and these were accompanied by numerous other books, editions, articles, and lectures. Considering that Chambers produced all this work alongside a demanding public function, Schoenbaum's words that 'The achievement of Sir Edmund Kerchever Chambers exceeds one's reasonable expectations of what may be accomplished in several lifetimes' certainly ring true.[60] One wonders whether in all of Robertson's disparagements of Chambers's work, not more than a hint of jealousy was involved. After all, for him there were never such honours as for Chambers, and as he grew older (and certainly none the richer) some bitterness on his part would hardly have been surprising.

This may be all the more true since in 1924, Chambers read a lecture before the British Academy on 'The Disintegration of Shakespeare', which, as

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[57] 'Shakespearean Idolatry', *Criterion*, 9 (1930), p. 247.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 248.

[59] For Chambers's life and career, see Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, pp. 511–21.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 511.

Schoenbaum has noted, inflicted a fatal blow to the cause of disintegration.[61] This lecture is worth examining in some detail, since it brings to the fore a number of aspects of Robertson's approach to Shakespeare which are crucial in answering the question whether Robertson may claim an objective, 'scientific' status for his own researches.

Chambers distinguishes three stages in Robertson's method of approach. The first is that of impressionist judgment:

> Certain passages do not answer to his conception of Shakespeare. Here is braggadocio, there an archaic stiffness, or flatness, or hackwork, or clumsy stage–craft, or pointless humour, or turgidity of thought, or falsity of moral sentiment. Or a whole play repels him. One reads like 'a mosaic of disparate parts'; in another he gets 'a strange feeling' about the general style. [5]

The next stage sees Robertson seeking confirmation for his misgivings by applying metrical and stylistic tests, based on the evolution of Shakespeare's blank verse. Finally, he settles down to look for clues to the possible presence of non–Shakespearean authorship, which may, for instance, be found in the use of un–Shakespearean vocabulary or turns of phrase. All this, Chambers argues, may sound logical enough, but is nonetheless 'largely disputable'. [6] For each of the stages, Chambers then proceeds to demonstrate why this should be the case.

As to the first, Chambers turns the tables on his opponent by showing that Robertson himself is the actual idolater of Shakespeare, by assigning to the playwright only the very best of what is present in the Folio:

> I am sure that Mr. Robertson desires to exalt and not to depreciate Shakespeare. And that is precisely where the mischief lies. Our heresiarch, in fact, is himself an idolater. We have all of us, in the long run, got to form our conception of the 'authentic' Shakespeare by means of an abstraction from the whole of the canon; there is no other material. Mr. Robertson abstracts through a series of rejections. He is repelled by childish work, by imitative work, by repetitive work, by conventional work, by unclarified work, by clumsy construction, by baldness or bombast. He idealizes. He looks for a Shakespeare always at the top of his achievement. This seems to me quite an arbitrary process. [8]

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[61] The lecture was reprinted in E.K. Chambers, *Shakespearean Gleanings* (Oxford, 1944), pp. 1–21. This edition was used here, and page numbers referring to it are given in brackets in the main text. The lecture also appears in Chambers's *Aspects of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1933).

Chambers asserted that he himself had no problems accepting Shakespeare as an experimenter who tried his hand at different styles, sometimes abruptly taking up a new mode of writing, but perhaps rejecting it soon afterwards because it proved unprofitable, for whatever reason. Shakespeare was, after all, 'receptive, as well as creative'. [9]

Similarly, with regard to the second stage of Robertson's approach, the verse tests, Chambers saw no reason why Shakespeare's development as a versifier should have been smoothly continuous. If Shakespeare's early plays should display a fondness for double–endings, which was then discarded, but later picked up again, why should this diminish Shakespeare's stature as a dramatist? Chambers seeks the reason why Robertson apparently felt so in a particular 'philosophical predisposition':

> Mr. Robertson dislikes the idea of what he calls a 'cerebral cataclysm'. To suppose that Shakespeare passed suddenly from the merely average and imitative merit of *Two Gentlemen* to the 'supreme poetic competence' of *Midsummer–Night's Dream* is contrary to a doctrine which sees in 'artistic growth as in other organic phenomena a process of evolution'. . . . And when Mr. Robertson expresses himself as taken aback by the notion of 'a literary miracle of genius elicited by some sudden supernatural troubling of the waters', I can only reply that he has given an admirable description of the way in which genius does in fact often appear to effloresce. [10–11]

According to Chambers, Robertson the evolutionist severely narrowed the outlook of Robertson the Shakespeare critic. In actual fact, there were no palpable reasons to expect biological analogies to apply to literature.

In his discussion of Robertson's final stage of assigning different hands to different plays, Chambers goes into some details of biographical and textual scholarship which again show Robertson to be in the wrong, but do not directly concern us here. What does concern us, however, is the fact that Chambers is so clearly right in his criticism of Robertson's methods, which no doubt must have infuriated Robertson beyond measure. Underlying all of the rationalist's investigations into the Shakespeare canon is the surprisingly simple notion that Shakespeare was a genius who could do no wrong. Rather than being the *outcome* of his researches, this is the basic *premise* on which the whole apparatus of Robertson's disintegration of the canon is founded. At times, this becomes blatantly obvious, as in the following fragment on Chapman's supposed authorship of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*:

> So here, once more, we have the traditional canon discrediting Shakespeare by fastening on him inferior work at a date at which

> he was entering his middle period. He is made to break down in his handling of Falstaff, who a few years before he had raised to the topmost height of humorous efficiency, and he is made to produce other poor comic matter, as well as a quantity of wholly uninspired verse in another man's style.
>
> Readers who will assent to all this merely because the play is included in the Folio, when even some Foliolators admit that Heminge and Condell would not have hesitated for a moment to include alien matter, are doing as poor a service to Shakespeare's fame as to the cause of scientific criticism.[62]

It seems that if there is one thing which Chambers makes clear, it is that in Robertson's perspective 'doing a service to Shakespeare's fame' and 'scientific criticism' are only too obviously connected.

This view was shared by John Dover Wilson, renowned editor of the *New Cambridge Shakespeare*, who, at one time, had fostered disintegrationist sympathies himself, and was duly chastised in Chambers's lecture of 1924. In 1929, Wilson gave a lecture to the British Academy on 'The Elizabethan Shakespeare' in which he mainly took Robertson to task over the latter's inability to see plays as plays, as dramatical performances within a particular theatrical context. Robertson responded as if he had been stabbed in the back by his most faithful ally. He attacked Wilson in the pages of the *Criterion* for having made a secret pact with his arch–enemy Chambers, so as to be rid of the odious epithet of 'disintegrator': 'Greater adaptability hath no man than this, that he mutilates his critical body in order to make a concordat with the mandarins!'[63] Wilson, in his turn, did keep his calm, and responded to Robertson's assault in measured terms. He pointed out in the *Criterion* that there were no real grounds for what he perceived as Robertson's double complaint, 'first that your own Shakespearian studies lack appreciation in 'academic' circles because they are too disturbingly subversive for orthodox scholars, and second that, cowed by the Olympian thunders of Sir Edmund Chambers in 1924, I have deserted the revolutionary cause and begun to play for safety.'[64] As far as Wilson was concerned, there was no single 'academic' view of Shakespeare, nor had he ever declared himself an official member of either Robertson's or Chambers's camp.

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[62] *The Genuine in Shakespeare*, p. 75.

[63] 'Shakespearean Idolatry', p. 251.

[64] J. Dover Wilson, 'Idolatry and Scepticism in Shakespearian Studies', *Criterion*, 9 (1930), p. 632. For criticism along similar lines, see Wilson's review of *The Problems of the Shakespeare Sonnets* in *Criterion*, 6 (1927), pp. 162–7, and of *The Genuine in Shakespeare* in *Criterion*, 10 (1931), pp. 537–41.

Like Chambers, however, Wilson came to the conclusion that Robertson's vision was impaired by his own idolatry of Shakespeare, and the resulting need to vindicate the Elizabethan against all possible assailants:

> What *is* this Shakespeare of your dreams? Someday, when your survey of the canon is complete, you will perhaps give us a collected edition of his works – a slender volume, I should guess, an anthology of dramatic verse rather than a collection of plays – and write an introduction thereto in which we shall be permitted to catch sight of the Master's face as it has been revealed to you. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the features you display in such a mirror will not seem wholly unfamiliar to the gazing world. They will demonstrate what many Britishers have long suspected, that Shakespeare though no doubt born at Stratford was of Scotch origin, and having got so far the world will find no difficulty in admitting the rest, namely his radicalism and his rationalism, both – such is the prophetic power of genius 'dreaming on things to come' – of a late nineteenth century pattern.[65]

As was to be expected, Robertson could not let this pass, and reprinted his *Criterion* piece in *The State of Shakespeare Studies* of 1931, alongside a number of equally vitriolic diatribes against such members of the 'academic' establishment as A.W. Pollard and Peter Alexander. Schoenbaum has pointed out how 'The heavy sarcasm, the gestures of accusation and defense, reveal the acuteness of his distress and familiar patterns of conspiratorial thinking.'[66] Clearly, a lifetime on the barricades had left deep marks, so that finally he could not live his life (or at least that limited part of it which we find expressed in print) without being haunted by the constant thought of hosts of enemies lurking just around the corner. In the case of his Shakespeare studies, it is tempting to speculate about the psychological motives which lie at the bottom of his lifelong defence of the flawlessness of Shakespeare's genius. There is no doubt that he clung to his vision with something approximating religious zeal, and some might perhaps argue that his belief in Shakespeare's genius filled the gap left by his total denial of conventional religious faith. The fact that it is hard to imagine any explanation which could have roused Robertson to greater polemical fury than this last, may in itself leave some room for thought.

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[65] *Ibid.*, p. 641.

[66] Schoenbaum, *Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship*, p. 118.

Conclusions

It would be unfair to Robertson not to attempt finally to redress the critical balance somewhat in his favour. His own reputation as a Shakespeare critic as well as that of the theory of disintegration may have suffered considerably since Chambers's lecture of 1924, but it should be remembered that in his own time he was widely respected as an Elizabethan scholar of unequalled erudition. In Augustus Ralli's massive *History of Shakespearian Criticism*, Robertson's work receives extensive treatment, and its author pays tribute to Robertson's 'Intellectual power, aesthetic understanding, industry, and clear thinking', while declaring himself a convert to disintegration.[67] One cannot help feeling that, had Robertson managed to keep his polemical instincts in check, his reputation would undoubtedly have stood the test of time much better.

In contemporary reviews of Robertson's books, although they are generally not blind to his more obvious defects, there is much praise of his accomplishments as a scholar. The *Westminster Review*, for instance, hailed his *Montaigne and Shakespeare* as handled 'with consummate ability and rare critical skill'.[68] Similarly, in a review of *Literary Detection. A Symposium on Macbeth* for the *Spectator*, J.M. Parsons congratulated Robertson on his 'sound critical judgment', 'accurate sense of verse rhythms', and 'unrivalled knowledge of the Elizabethan drama'.[69] In the *Review of English Studies*, U.M. Ellis–Fermor found her admiration called forth by *The State of Shakespeare Study* for 'the ease with which he moves among data so numerous and so complex in their relations as almost to demand for their expression the formulae of the organic chemist.'[70] Apart from Dover Wilson's skirmishes with Robertson, T.S. Eliot's *Criterion* proved particularly ready to extend a hearty welcome to a new Shakespearean study by Robertson. On the subject of *Literary Detection*, Bonamy Dobree found Robertson's rigorous methods quite stimulating:

> Mr. Robertson is a crusader: whenever he meets an infidel he slashes ruthlessly with his shining sword, and the limbs of his enemies, such as Sir Edmund Chambers, lie scattered and bloody about the battlefield. All his performances are exhilarating, and we run along by his horse's side, clinging desperately to his stirrup,

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[67] Augustus Ralli, *A History of Shakespearian Criticism*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1932), II, 233. Ralli's history contains extensive summaries of most of Robertson's books on Shakespeare.

[68] *Westminster Review*, 148 (1897), pp. 712–13.

[69] *Spectator* (30 January 1932), pp. 149–50.

[70] *Review of English Studies*, 8 (1932), pp. 362–3.

> crying: 'Let me play the crusader, too!' and come out at the end flushed with victory. For it is extremely difficult not to agree with Mr. Robertson. His is not what you would call a persuasive manner in the ordinary sense, but there is no resisting him. Armed with the authority of profound erudition, which he wields with an authoritative mind, he conscripts us to his service – We are not unwilling soldiers.[71]

The most famous among Robertson's admirers was undoubtedly T.S. Eliot himself, who declared in the *Nation & Athenaeum* of 12 February 1927 that he had 'always agreed' with Robertson's disintegration of the Shakespeare canon.[72] In fact, Eliot's famous essay on 'Hamlet' of 1919, in which he concluded that the play was 'most certainly an artistic failure' turns out to be largely based on Robertson's theory of its genesis. Addressing the age–old question why Hamlet should have delayed the slaying of his stepfather, Robertson demonstrated that Shakespeare was reworking an older play by Thomas Kyd, which 'intractable material' prevented him from fusing the different parts of the play into an artistic whole.[73] From a crudely plotted tragedy of revenge he transformed *Hamlet* into a subtle psychological study on the effects of a mother's guilt upon her son. Unfortunately, the feeble structure of the older play could not carry the weight of character study which Shakespeare imposed upon it, so that the final result is a play which is 'not finally intelligible as it stands'.[74] However, considering the fact that he was 'as usual, adapting an old play for his company, in the way of business', Shakespeare, Robertson argued, nonetheless worked wonders, so that 'His real triumph was to turn a crude play into the masterpiece which he has left us.'[75] Eliot found in Robertson's theory the justification for his own misgivings regarding the play, which he finally and famously expressed in the notion that it lacked an 'objective correlative'.[76]

In the nearly seven decades which have passed since Robertson's death in 1933, there have been only few attempts to stimulate a renewal of interest in Robertson's Shakespeare criticism. Perhaps the most notable effort was made in 1987 by Ian Mackillop, in a short article on Robertson entitled 'The Literary

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[71] *Criterion*, 11 (1932), pp. 324–7.

[72] *Nation & Athenaeum* (12 February 1927), pp. 664–5.

[73] *The Problem of 'Hamlet'*, p. 75.

[74] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[75] *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 86.

[76] For Robertson and Eliot, see Leo Storm, 'J.M. Robertson and T.S. Eliot: A Note on the Genesis of Modern Critical Theory', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 5 (1976), pp. 315–21.

Critic: Modernity and Modernism'.[77] Mackillop's remarkable claim is that Robertson's belief in collaborative composition places him among the ranks of the Modernists; hence also Eliot's interest in him. According to Mackillop, 'it is surely completely plausible to find the poet [Eliot] recognising in the disintegrator an aesthetic which corresponded to his own' and he goes on to state that 'The 'fitting', or layering, of contrary parts is completely in tune with Eliot's own poetic method, and it is exactly the subject of Robertson's work on Shakespeare.' Much as one would like to give whatever possible new impetus to Robertson's reputation by agreeing with Mackillop and calling Robertson a modernist *avant la lettre*, it seems, unfortunately, that Mackillop misses the point entirely. The fact that Eliot may have been attracted by the idea that Shakespeare's plays were the product of a collaborative effort, does not make Robertson a modernist. Robertson emphatically did not have an 'aesthetic' which favoured 'layering' and 'fragmentization'; on the contrary, he spent many years of his life attempting to prove that *in spite of* the evidence for composite authorship, Shakespeare's genius was raised above all doubt. Nor did Robertson seem at all interested in the Modernist movement, which is – to my knowledge – never even mentioned in all his copious writings. In his attempt to incite new interest in Robertson the literary critic, Mackillop seems to have proceeded on the naive assumption that there exists a self–evident association between the use of terms like 'layering' and 'collaborative composition' on the one hand, and modernism on the other. On the same grounds, one might well call Robertson a deconstructionist; did he not, after all, 'deconstruct' the Shakespeare canon?

Rather than to claim for Robertson a position in the vanguard of some critical movement, it would be best to concentrate on his actual strengths. Although the above discussion has at times been severely critical of Robertson's efforts, there is still enough that may be salvaged from the wreck. Robertson's knowledge of Elizabethan drama is beyond question, and he shows himself acutely conscious of the circumstances in which that drama was produced: the fact that Shakespeare was the busy actor–manager of a theatre company, who constantly had to keep in mind the demands of his audience, if only for economic reasons; that these demands were uncommonly varied and wide–ranging, and necessitated a particular brand of theatre; that genius means nothing if the conditions are not available to make it flower. These are all useful propositions which were by no means common in Shakespeare scholarship when Robertson started his work on the canon, which is to no small extent based on such practical, realistic premises. With his recognition of the

[77] Ian Mackillop, 'The Literary Critic: Modernity and Modernism', in *J.M. Robertson (1856–1933). Liberal, Rationalist, and Scholar*, ed. G.A. Wells (London, 1987), pp. 58–65.

relevance of the immediate environment to artistic creation, his knowledge of those actual circumstances, and his undeniable sensitivity to language, Robertson might have had a more important contribution to Shakespeare scholarship than he finally did. Shakespeare was his idol; had he been less prepared to jump to its defence at every hint of disparagement, had he been – ironically enough – more 'rational' in the treatment of his adversaries, his own contribution to the history of dramatic criticism might have been an altogether different one.

Part 2: Robertson on fiction

Introduction

When we turn from Robertson's criticism of drama to that of fiction, we also shift our main focus from the Elizabethan age to the contemporary literary scene. The criticism Robertson wrote for the periodical press in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century shows that he was keen to keep his finger on the pulse of the evolution of the novel, which he felt had progressed so much more rapidly and promisingly in the Victorian era than that of drama. 'Put the two lines of development side by side', he remarked in his essay on 'Evolution in Drama', 'and the force of the contrast becomes overwhelming. . . . even the creditable work of our abler dramatists stands wofully [*sic*] little chance of holding its own on the stream of time against the fiction which has made the last fifty years stand out as a literary period.'[78] However, by the time Robertson started publishing his criticism of fiction in the mid–1880s, the great mid–Victorian novelists like Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, and George Eliot were no longer alive, the death of Trollope in 1882 marking the end of a brilliant era. Surveying the literature of 1890 for the *National Reformer*, Robertson felt forced to conclude that 'We are still sinking in the quality of our general fiction.'[79] Progress, in other words, was by no means ensured, and Robertson, as always, saw his own criticism of fiction as a means to smooth its path.

Considering the fact that Robertson saw the nineteenth–century evolution of the novel as such a significant phenomenon, it comes as somewhat of a surprise that his output on fiction turns out to be considerably smaller than that on drama or poetry. In the end, Robertson's greatest interest was admittedly always in poetry (whether or not in dramatic form) first, and the novel simply

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[78] 'Evolution in Drama', *Our Corner*, 7 (1886), p. 280.

[79] 'Literature in 1890', *National Reformer* (28 December 1890), p. 402.

had to take second place in his consideration. Moreover, there is no denying that novel-reading is a time-consuming activity, for which a man as busy as Robertson may not always have been able to carve out the time. Be that as it may, it is an unfortunate fact that Robertson apparently never found the time or opportunity to write about some of the novelists he respected most. The most obvious case is that of Turgenev, the author whom Robertson tended to place highest in the international hierarchy of nineteenth-century fictionists. In a letter to his protégé Richard Curle (who is particularly known for his contribution to furthering Joseph Conrad's literary reputation), he congratulated the younger man on finishing an essay on the Russian novelist, since 'I have always failed to write one on him.'[80] In other cases, notably Hawthorne and Thackeray, Robertson did write a number of short pieces, but these cannot be considered serious attempts at an in-depth evaluation of the author's work. All in all, it should be admitted that there are certain gaps in the picture we have of Robertson's views on the novel.

It is, however, a picture which is certainly not lacking in vivacity and interest, nor should the gaps prevent us from taking in the whole. Most of Robertson's novel-criticism dates from the 1880s and 1890s, a period of transition in the development of the British novel and a period in which a number of important debates took place regarding the direction the relatively new genre was to take. At the centre of these debates was the question of realism in the novel, which, to a smaller or greater extent, permeated the work of most fiction critics of the day. Robertson proved no exception, and throughout his criticism of contemporary novelists we find him grappling with the problem of representing reality in fiction, and we see him adopt realism as a critical criterion for establishing a novel's success in various different ways. To place Robertson's criticism in context, this chapter therefore opens with a brief overview of the late-Victorian debate regarding realism. Subsequently, Robertson's views on a number of contemporary novelists will be discussed in detail. In spite of the fact that Robertson did not write as copiously about the novel as about drama and poetry, it would still require many more pages than available here to outline his views on all the novelists which received his critical attention. A selection has therefore been made on the basis of the quality and comprehensiveness of Robertson's treatment of a particular novelist, and the novelists who thus make their appearance as objects of Robertson's scrutiny here are W.D. Howells, Emile Zola, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad. In the course of the

[80] Letter to Curle, 16 December 1908; Robertson's correspondence with Richard Curle is in the Lilly Library, Indiana, Curle MSS III [1904–1929]. The correspondence with Curle is discussed in more detail in the section dealing with 'Robertson on Conrad'.

discussion of Robertson's criticism of these novelists, it will often be appropriate to refer to his views on other novelists by way of comparison, so that in the end a reasonably representative picture of Robertson's thoughts on the novel and on nineteenth and early twentieth-century novelists should emerge.

The Late-Victorian Debate on Realism in the Novel[81]

The 1880s were crucial years in the development of the British novel. After decades of often vehement debate, the status of the novel as a morally, intellectually, and aesthetically respectable art-form finally seemed ensured. Although, as Kenneth Graham records, even as late as 1898 a critic could be found writing in *Blackwood's* that all novel-reading was in the end 'enervating and debilitating rather than bracing and tonic',[82] the novel was no longer widely considered a danger to the moral sensibilities of its readers. The great mid-Victorian generation of Dickens and Thackeray was succeeded by novelists like Hardy, Moore, and Gissing, who were bent on establishing the novel in the educated public's eye as demanding serious intellectual consideration. Fiction's role as a supplier of popular entertainment receded into the background of the critical debate, and a theoretical discussion arose regarding the aesthetic properties of the new genre which found a notable high point in Henry James's 'The Art of Fiction' of 1884. The validity of the novel as an art-form, in short, was no longer under serious attack. The question now was: which direction was fiction going to take?

In answering this question, the issue of realism loomed large. As Clarence Decker has observed, it is impossible to trace exactly the sources of nineteenth century realism, buried deep as they are in the cultural, economic, psychological, and other developments of the age.[83] There is, however, no doubt that the rationalist-scientific revolution as briefly outlined for the British context in the second chapter of this study lies at its background. The rising concern for the physical, material aspects of human existence, the faith in science as providing essential insight into these aspects, the emphasis on the

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[81] The following books provide the most comprehensive overview of the late-Victorian debate on realism and have supplied the backbone for the present discussion: Clarence R. Decker, *The Victorian Conscience* (New York, 1952); Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900* (Oxford, 1965); Paul Goetsch, *Die Romankonzeption in England 1880–1910* (Heidelberg, 1967). See also William C. Frierson, 'The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction 1885–1895', *PMLA*, 63 (1928), pp. 533–50.

[82] J.H. Millar, 'Among the Young Lions', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 158 (1898), p. 742. Quoted from Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900*, p. 6.

[83] Decker, *The Victorian Conscience*, pp. 17–18.

workings of causality, the growing belief that heredity and the environment were the essential determinants in the making of human individuals, all these factors contributed to engendering a realist aesthetic which found such eloquent expression in the great nineteenth-century novel of Europe and America.[84]

In England, the mid-Victorian generation of novelists had found its greatest champion of realism in fiction in George Eliot, outspoken (though not dogmatic) rationalist and scientific thinker. In Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* she famously interrupted the flow of her narrative to expound her views on the subject:

> So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. . . . Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings – much harder than to say something fine about them which is *not* the exact truth.[85]

In Eliot's emphasis on 'truth' as opposed to 'falsity' we recognize the high moral tone of the period. Her view of realism does not so much concentrate on the exact representation of physical reality in fictional form (although any reader of *Middlemarch* would certainly affirm her powers in that department), as on the representation of the moral truth of life. In her novels she herself is emphatically present as a mediator between the reader and the fictional reality she constructs. The realism George Eliot represents is in that sense a realism cast in a subjectivist, idealist mould, and in this connection it is also instructive to glance briefly at the work of George Henry Lewes, who was such an important influence on Eliot, and who himself has received due credit for being one of the early supporters of the novel as a genre.[86] In his *Principles of Success in Literature*, Lewes criticizes 'the rage for "realism"' for confounding 'truth with familiarity', and for its 'predominance of unessential details'. Realism as Lewes sees it is idealist in nature, in the sense that it affords a 'vision of realities in their highest and most affecting forms'.[87] To Lewes as

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[84] Maurice Larkin, *Man and Society in Nineteenth-Century Realism. Determinism and Literature* (London, 1977), pp. 1–6.

[85] Reprinted in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. George J. Becker (Princeton NJ, 1963), p. 114.

[86] See the section on G.H. Lewes's *Principles of Success in Literature* in Chapter 3, Part 1.

[87] G.H. Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature*, pp. 84, 82.

much as to Eliot, it is finally not the depiction of realistic detail which makes art, but the subjective moral vision of the artist.

In 1885, George Moore's published his *The Mummer's Wife*, widely considered the first British novel to challenge this traditional, morally infused idealist approach to realism in fiction.[88] The book attracted little attention at the time, but it was not long before the naturalist realism advocated and practised by the Frenchman by which it was inspired, Emile Zola, came to occupy the centre of the critical stage.[89] As Hippolyte Taine had proposed to remove the subjective element from criticism by adopting the methods of science, so Zola advocated a strictly objective approach to the writing of fiction along scientific, empirical lines. In his famous essay 'Le Roman Expérimental', he defined his conception of the 'experimental novelist' as follows:

> The experimental novelist is therefore he who accepts proved facts, who shows in man and society the mechanism of the phenomena which science has mastered, and who lets his personal sentiments enter in only concerning those phenomena whose determinism is not yet fixed, while he tries to control this personal sentiment, this *a priori* idea, as well as he can by observation and by experiment.[90]

A novelist who thus based his practice on the impersonal observation of physical reality would naturally not shun the candid depiction of those aspects of human life at which Victorian morality and idealism recoiled, sexuality obviously being the main offender. On the whole, the British critics of the 1880s were horrified at what they could then for the first time read in English translation. Although the enthusiasm for science reached its peak in this decade, a critic like W.S. Lilly (writing in the by no means unprogressive *Fortnightly Review* on 1 August 1885) was typically repelled by the uses to which it was put in Zola's naturalist fiction, finding that there 'obscenity and cruelty – the natural, the inevitable results of Materialism – have sought to conceal their foul and hideous lineaments under the mask of science.'[91] In

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[88] Christopher Heywood, 'French and American sources of Victorian realism', *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, 1 (1979), pp. 107–26, esp. 108.

[89] On the English reception of Zola, see Decker, *The Victorian Conscience*, pp. 79–114; Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900*, pp. 56–61; Goetsch, *Die Romankonzeption in England 1880–1910*, pp. 43–6; Clarence R. Decker, 'Zola's Literary Reputation in England', *PMLA*, 49 (1934), pp. 1140–53. On the general influence of French naturalism on English fiction, see William C. Frierson, *L'influence du naturalisme français sur les romanciers anglais de 1885 à 1900* (Paris, 1925).

[90] Reprinted and translated in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, p. 195.

[91] *Ibid.*, p. 287.

Locksley Hall, Sixty Years After of 1886, Tennyson gave poetic expression to his nightmare–vision of 'maiden fancies wallowing in the troughs of Zolaism', voicing, as so often, the feelings of many of his contemporaries.

It was through the enterprise of the publisher Henry Vizetelly (1820–1894) that Zola's work was brought to the attention of the British public in the first place. Vizetelly's love for French literature combined with his nose for business led him to publish translations of seventeen of Zola's novels between 1884 and 1889.[92] Up to 1887, his venture proved a great commercial success, and while the critics in the periodicals and newspapers were loudly denouncing Zola's supposed moral depravity, Vizetelly and his sons Edward and Ernest could barely keep up with popular demand for the translations. However, trouble arose in 1887 when, on the publication of the (already heavily bowdlerized) translation of *La Terre*, the National Vigilance Society sought out W.T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and self–appointed guardian of Victorian morality, to head their attack on Vizetelly and Zola in the name of common decency. Stead, nothing if not an effective propagandist, managed to raise a public storm which finally led to Vizetelly being brought to trial twice, in 1888 and 1889, on charges of bringing obscene material before the public. The outcome was that Vizetelly, by that time an old and sick man, was sent to prison for three months. Robertson himself, outraged by this display of middle–class narrow–mindedness, attempted to come to Vizetelly's aid. In June 1889, he drew up a petition to the Home Secretary which he hoped to get signed by 'some literary men', and defiantly sent it for publication to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, of which Stead was the editor. Not altogether surprisingly, Stead simply refused to print it and so the plan foundered.[93] However, one month later Robertson received a request from one of Vizetelly's sons to sign a new petition, which finally, carrying the names of progressive intellectuals like J.A. Symonds, Havelock Ellis, Leslie Stephen, Thomas Hardy, Olive Schreiner and many others, did manage to procure Vizetelly's release.[94] However, the affair had broken the publisher's spirit and he died a few years later.

The Vizetelly trial provides an appropriate symbol for the English opposition to French naturalist realism in the 1880s, in which the works of

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[92] For a detailed account of the Vizetelly trial and the circumstances surrounding it, see Graham King, *Garden of Zola. Emile Zola and his Novels for English Readers* (London, 1978), pp. 228–54. See also Phyllis Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis. A Biography* (New York, 1985), p. 113.

[93] J.M. Robertson, 'The Censorship Once More', *National Reformer* (23 June 1889), pp. 388–9; see also J.M. Robertson, 'The Censorship of Literature', *National Reformer* (13, 20, 27 January 1889), pp. 18–19, 35–6, 50–1.

[94] Robertson to E.A. Vizetelly, 17 July 1889. This letter is in the J. Harlin O'Connell Collection, Princeton University Library.

Flaubert, De Maupassant and the Goncourt brothers were also commonly included. However, the debate on realism of this decade did not focus exclusively on French naturalism: there was also a powerful American influence to be reckoned with. The works of William Dean Howells and Henry James were widely discussed in the British periodical press, and received much adverse criticism which, however, as Kenneth Graham has remarked, was 'more varied and on the whole more valuable than that devoted to Zola', being less dominated by moral denunciation and allowing more room for the discussion of aesthetic principles.[95] On the whole, both Howells and James were charged with being excessively realistic, in the sense of presenting aspects of life which were simply considered trivial or uninteresting, regardless of the way they were treated. James, moreover, was criticized for not writing a conventional 'story', for being too analytical and pessimistic, and for setting his readers constantly on the wrong foot as far their sympathies for the main characters were concerned.[96] Contradictorily enough, James was thus sometimes censured for being too realistic as well as too artificial at the same time.

Like Zola, both Howells and James combined the function of novelist with that of critic, and made some of the most important theoretical statements on realism in fiction of the age. In *Criticism and Fiction*, a vigorous affirmation of the intellectual and moral status of the novel, Howells describes the true realist as one who is

> careful of every fact, and feels himself bound to express or to indicate its meaning at the risk of over–moralizing. In life he finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character; nothing that God has made is contemptible. He cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry.[97]

In spite of Howells's emphasis on the novelist's duty to overlook no aspect of life, he is clearly no outright follower of Zola's naturalism. Whereas Zola sees the role of the novelist as that of an objective, unobtrusive presenter of facts, Howells takes a more traditional line in assigning to the novelist the task of

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[95] Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900*, p. 49. For Howells's English reception, see J.A. Dowling, 'W.D. Howells' Literary Reputation in England', *Dalhousie Review*, 45 (1965), pp. 277–88; for James, see *Henry James. The Critical Heritage*, ed. Roger Gard (London, 1968).

[96] *Henry James. The Critical Heritage*, p. 5 ('Introduction').

[97] W.D. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*, eds C. Marburg Kirk and R. Kirk (New York, 1959), p. 15.

explaining reality for the reader, something with which George Eliot would have found it hard to quarrel. One might argue that Howells's theoretical contribution to the late–Victorian debate on realism therefore consisted in the first place in widening the range of subjects fit for the novel to deal with, while retaining a pronounced moral bias to the novel's function.

In 1875, Henry James was introduced in Paris to a group of realist and naturalist writers whom he would later refer to as 'the grandsons of Balzac': Gustave Flaubert, Edmond de Goncourt, Ivan Turgenev, Emile Zola, Alphonse Daudet, and Guy de Maupassant.[98] In the years following this first encounter with naturalism, James came to sympathize more and more with its views and aims, a fact which is reflected in his most famous essay, 'The Art of Fiction', first published in *Longman's Magazine* of September 1884.[99] At the centre of its argument lies James's contention, in sympathy with the naturalists' goals, that all we can legitimately ask of the novel is 'that it be interesting', and that the novelist should not otherwise be restricted in his liberty:

> A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say.[100]

This line of reasoning leads him eventually to the question of the relation between morality and art, in which he takes up the bold position that 'questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair'.[101] He cannot help but note that the English novel tends to be addressed to 'young people', which is unfortunate, since 'There are certain things which it is generally agreed not to discuss, not even to mention, before young people';[102] truth to life simply cannot be achieved when the novel's scope is thus narrowed. James does grant that the final quality of a work of art depends on the quality of the mind of the producer, and that it is at this point (but at this point only) that the moral and the artistic sense come very close together. All in all, James's essay is a remarkably outspoken affirmation of the novelist's artistic autonomy.

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[98] Lyall H. Powers, *Henry James and the Naturalist Movement* (Michigan State U.P., 1971).

[99] James's essay is reprinted in *Victorian Criticism of the Novel*, eds Edwin M. Eigner and George J. Worth (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 193–212. This is the text referred to here.

[100] *Victorian Criticism of the Novel*, p. 199.

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 210.

[102] *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Three months after its publication in *Longman's Magazine,* 'The Art of Fiction', itself a rejoinder to Walter Besant's essay of the same title, called forth a reaction entitled 'A Humble Remonstrance' in the same pages by Robert Louis Stevenson.[103] James's and Stevenson's essays encapsulate neatly the debate regarding realism and romance which arose in the 1880s. In 'A Humble Remonstrance', Stevenson opposes to James's realistic 'novel of character', in which 'the statics of character' are analyzed and 'stronger passions' are avoided, his own 'dramatic novel', in which 'passion is the be–all and the end–all, the plot and the solution, the protagonist and the *deus ex machinâ* [*sic*] in one'.[104] He offers the young writer advice from the heart:

> Let him not care particularly if he miss the tone of conversation, the pungent material detail of the day's manners, the reproduction of the atmosphere and the environment. These elements are not essential: a novel may be excellent, and yet have none of them . . . And as the root of the whole matter, let him bear in mind that his novel is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude; but a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity.[105]

In Stevenson's view, realism is therefore primarily a means which the novelist may employ as he wishes, not an end in itself. As far as morality and art are concerned, he does agree with James that there is no self–evident connection between the two.

Stevenson became the great late–Victorian champion of the romance, the revival of which in the 1880s was greeted with what might be called relieved enthusiasm by critics like George Saintsbury and in particular Andrew Lang, who did not tire of extolling the virtues of the new wave of romance writers in his copious criticism of the period.[106] Here at last was a literary movement which offered the weary reader relief from the supposed dullness and dreariness of the realist novel by unashamedly placing great passion, exciting incident, pure heroines, intrepid heroes and much more to thrill the reader once more at the centre of the literary stage, as Scott (now once more a great example) had done before. Only now, as Donald D. Stone has remarked, 'The documented romanticism of Sir Walter Scott gave way to the exotic romanticizing of H. Rider Haggard, just as the sympathetic realism of George

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[103] The text used here is that reprinted in *Victorian Criticism of the Novel*, pp. 213–22.

[104] *Ibid.*, p. 220.

[105] *Ibid.*, pp. 221–2.

[106] For the debate on realism vs. romance, see Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900*, pp. 61–70; Goetsch, *Die Romankonzeption in England 1880–1910*, pp. 58–61; Donald D. Stone, *Novelists in a Changing World* (Cambridge MA, 1972), pp. 24–35.

Eliot was replaced by the detached, analytical realism . . . of her disciple Henry James.'[107] Romance writers like Rider Haggard, Hall Caine, Anthony Hope and Stevenson himself achieved tremendous popularity, among the critics as much as among the general public. This was, after all, a period in which the feeling that the great age of Queen Victoria was past its prime achieved general currency, and the rejuvenated genre of the romance offered the perfect outlet for escapist tendencies. Moreover, the revival of the romance may be seen as part of the wider movement of aestheticism which arose in the last two decades of the century, in the sense that its proponents placed particular emphasis on the formal aspects of fiction writing and saw morality and art (here Stevenson agreed with James) as belonging to distinctly different planes.[108]

It is interesting to note that Edmund Gosse places the meteoric rise to fame of Rudyard Kipling from 1889 onwards in the context of the controversy on realism and romance:[109]

> The fiction of the Anglo–Saxon world, in its more intellectual provinces, had become curiously femininized. Those novel–writers who cared to produce subtle impressions upon their readers, in England and America, had become extremely refined in taste and discreet in judgment. People who were not content to pursue the soul of their next–door neighbor [*sic*] through all the burrows of self–consciousness had no choice but to take ship with Mr. Rider Haggard for the 'Mountains of the Moon'. Between excess of psychological analysis and excess of superhuman romance, there was a great void in the world of Anglo–Saxon fiction.[110]

According to Gosse, it was this void which Kipling, with a novel blend of 'exotic realism' and a 'vigorous rendering of unhackneyed experience', filled to great effect, so that only shortly after his arrival in London in October 1889, Kipling became a literary celebrity. In an unsigned review for the *Daily News*, Andrew Lang did in fact praise *Plain Tales from the Hills* for its unprecedented combination of realism and romance:

> It may safely be said that *Plain Tales from the Hills* will teach more of India, of our task there, of the various people whom we try

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[107] Stone, *Novelists in a Changing World*, p. 25.

[108] For the rise of aestheticism, see Chapter 4, Part 3 on 'Robertson on Poetry'.

[109] For Kipling's literary reputation, see *Kipling. The Critical Heritage*, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green (London, 1971); Edgar Mertner, *Rudyard Kipling und seine Kritiker* (Darmstadt, 1983).

[110] *Rudyard Kipling. The Critical Heritage*, pp. 105–6. Gosse's article first appeared in the *Century Magazine*, 48 (1891), pp. 901–10.

> to rule, than many Blue Books. Here is an unbroken field of actual romance, here are incidents as strange as befall in any city of dream, any Kôr or Zu–Vendis, and the incidents are true.[111]

The causes for Kipling's success in the 1890s are complex indeed, and may to a large extent also have their roots in the political dimension of Kipling's work. Nonetheless, Gosse's suggestion is a valuable one, and it also shows how intricately realism and romance are at some points interwoven, making it difficult to place either critics or novelists in separate, clearly defined categories.

With Kipling we have now arrived in the 1890s, a decade in which criticism gradually began to reconcile itself with the changes realism, in particular French naturalism, had wrought in contemporary fiction. Not that Zola, for instance, could now count on general enthusiasm, but when he visited England in 1893 he was at least greeted with the respect due to a foreign master and was even made an honorary member of the Athenaeum Club.[112] The climate was clearly becoming more favourable to the realist movement, a fact which is particularly apparent in the English reception of the Russian realists in this period.[113] The great three, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky, generally received sympathetic and at times even enthusiastic treatment in the periodical press. Clarence Decker has argued that whereas the late–Victorians tended to find French naturalism 'materialistic, impersonal, futilitarian, mechanistic, and sordid', Russian realism appealed to them as being 'spiritual, humanitarian, moral, and permeated with faith, hope, and charity'.[114] Although Tolstoy appears to have been more widely read, it was Turgenev in particular who, in spite of his close association with French naturalism, could count on the highest esteem among literary critics.[115] It was by no means unusual to come across a verdict such as that of R.G. Burton, who, writing in the *Westminster Review* of December 1895, called Turgenev's novels 'practically perfect as works of art'.[116] Aesthetes and moralists alike found in Turgenev's work a model well worth emulating, thereby contributing in their turn to the more general appreciation of the realist aesthetic.

Paul Goetsch has shown that it would be far from correct to assume that after 1895, the debate on realism and naturalism was over, and to some extent,

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[111] *Ibid.*, p. 48. Lang's unsigned review first appeared in the *Daily News* of 2 November 1889.

[112] King, *Garden of Zola*, p. 253.

[113] See Decker, *The Victorian Conscience*, pp. 131–45; Goetsch, *Die Romankonzeption in England 1880–1910*, pp. 65–6.

[114] Decker, *The Victorian Conscience*, p. 144.

[115] Royal A. Gettmann, *Turgenev in England and America* (Urbana, 1941), pp. 135–8.

[116] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Mrs. Grundy was still as alert as before.[117] After all, it was in 1895 that Thomas Hardy turned from the novel to poetry, believing that the latter would allow him greater artistic liberty. In Goetsch's view, criticism of fiction between 1896 and 1914 continued the earlier discussions, although the emphases tended to shift. The distinction between realism and romance, for instance, continued to be the subject of controversy, but with a growing awareness among critics of the points of contact between the two genres, which may well have facilitated the reception of an author as difficult to categorize as Joseph Conrad. On the whole one might conclude that such finer discussions point to the fact that in the course of two decades the debate on realism had greatly gained in intellectual and theoretical depth, in a gradual movement away from the outright denunciation of Zola in the 1880s. In the following section, I will attempt to place the novel criticism of J.M. Robertson in the context of this development.

Robertson on Howells

Robertson's response to the work of the American realist W.D. Howells is recorded in two essays. The first, 'Mr. Howells' Novels' was originally published in the *Westminster Review* in 1884,[118] at the very beginning of Robertson's career as a critic, while the second, 'Mr. Howells' Recent Novels' dates from 1890.[119] Of the two, the first is by far the most interesting as giving the most wide-ranging overview of Howells's work, while also offering a useful introduction to Robertson's views on the novel in general and on realism in the novel in particular. I will therefore use this essay as the focus of the following discussion of Robertson's criticism of the American novelist.

Robertson opens his essay with the observation that Howells's novels have rightfully received a friendly reception from the British public in the past few years, since there is in them 'something refreshing and stimulating' for the reader who does not demand sensationalism. [151] One of Howells's greatest assets is in fact his abandonment of those devices which detract from a realistic representation of life:

> Here there are no mysterious crimes; no studies in circumstantial evidence; no staggering surprises; few rescues, and these quite ordinary. The novelist has gone beyond George Eliot in his

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[117] Goetsch, *Die Romankonzeption in England 1880–1910*, pp. 68–76.

[118] 'Mr. Howells' Novels', *Westminster Review*, 66 (1884), pp. 347–375; reprinted in *ETCM*, pp. 148–199; the page numbers in square brackets in the main text refer to *ETCM*.

[119] Reprinted in *Criticisms*, I, pp. 111–21. The original year of publication is mentioned here as 1890, but it is not clear where the essay was first published.

> abandonment of plot and intrigue, and challenges us to try how a dexterously handled love–story will do on its own basis. [152]

On this head, Robertson has particular praise for *A Chance Acquaintance*, which to him calls to mind the work of Jane Austen, of which he elsewhere wrote that it 'is a revelation of the possibilities of the novel in the way of the presentment of normal character independently of thrilling plot.'[120] However, Howells, who has had the opportunity to learn from realists like George Eliot, Balzac, and Turgenev, goes beyond Austen in his realization that 'a good fictionist is not simply to concoct for us a story with an agreeable ending, but is to impress us with a sense of his faithfulness to an actual life that is full of broken threads and pathetic failures.' [154] As Kenneth Graham has noted, the praise Robertson expresses here for the lack of happy endings in the earlier Howells is quite uncharacteristic of the time.[121] Robertson even goes so far as to say that *A Chance Acquaintance* is 'only a good story in virtue of the final breach between the ill–assorted lovers.' As it is now, he pronounces it 'a sound and promising sample of realistic fiction' with 'the truthfulness of Tourguénief', which, by Robertson's standards, is high praise indeed. [155]

However, Robertson feels forced to conclude that Howells's later work does not bear out his original promise:

> Now, the gist of the critical finding against Mr. Howells is, firstly, that after promising to give us sound realistic work, employing both observation and meditation on life, he has descended to the function of producing lollipops; and, secondly, that when he has sought since to present the desirable realistic and conscientious work he has exhibited a lack of the necessary width and depth of thought – in short, deficient philosophic capacity. [157]

Robertson concedes that Howells remains an excellent stylist throughout his work (he gives several pages of examples), and that in that limited sense he may well be considered a deserving pupil of George Eliot, who 'brought into the language a new and complex harmony, in which all elements of strength seemed combined.' [159–60] But that does not prevent him from being reduced to producing 'work apparently inspired chiefly by the desire to tickle the palate', Robertson's first point of criticism. [170] With regard to the second point, Robertson observes that George Eliot, unlike Howells, 'added to the artistic gratification an impression of adequate mentality such as we do not seem likely to have from any one else for a while'. [158–59] What separates

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[120] 'Jane Austen', in *Criticisms*, I, p. 24.

[121] Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900*, p. 53.

truly great novelists like Eliot from more modest practitioners like Howells is the fact that their work is 'rounded and controlled by an adequate theory of life – a theory which makes itself felt behind all their work.' [176–7] To Robertson, this is a central critical criterion:

> We do not leave a novel of Hawthorne, of Balzac, of Tourguénief, of George Eliot, of Thackeray even, in a state of mere confusion and discontent. We feel that they are equal to their work; that they have their personages in hand; that they have a philosophy which sums matters up. [183]

In Howells's case, the lack of a unifying philosophy not only affects his books as wholes, it also affects the intelligibility of his characters. When Howells wishes to create characters possessed with superior intellectual or psychological qualities, the outcome is severely limited by the relative shallowness of his own philosophical insight. This becomes particularly apparent in Howells's depiction of his women characters, of which Robertson is especially critical:

> Those of us who confess we find Mr. Howells's women charming, go far to say that we like a woman to be a trifle silly; that we do not want to find in her an intellectual or even a quite rational companion. [187]

Thus Howells, in attempting to create realistic characters, cannot help running into the limitations of his own philosophy of life. In the final summing up of his literary merits, Robertson therefore describes him – note the telling choice of words – as 'an intermediate type in the evolution of fictional art', whose pursuit of realism is to be applauded as pointing the direction for future progress, but who himself cannot be promised 'a full bodied immortality'.[122] [199]

It now becomes obvious that Robertson may be a champion of realism, but the mere depiction of realistic detail unregulated by a sustained moral philosophy is of little value to him. At this early point in his career as a critic, his ideal of the realist novelist was still very much embodied by George

[122] Robertson did not change his opinion when he reviewed Howells's later novels in 'Mr. Howells' Recent Novels'. There he concludes that 'whereas it is impossible to read him without his wit and his adroitness of workmanship, it is also . . . impossible not to resent the alliance of such gifts with an unmasculine quality of mental fibre.' (p. 113) It might be argued that Robertson's use of the term 'unmasculine' is in itself questionable.

Eliot.[123] A few years later, Robertson was to come under the influence of an author who advocated a more radical brand of realism than Eliot (and certainly than Howells), and who, rather than praised for his moral rectitude, was generally denounced in the press for his supposed lack of it: Emile Zola.

Robertson on Zola

In October 1893, Robertson read a paper on Zola to the Liberal Social Union which was not reprinted until ten years later in volume two of his *Criticisms*.[124] The paper is an important one since even in 1893, when Zola received a cordial reception on his visit to England, it was still rare to come across a critic who so whole-heartedly (though not uncritically) welcomes Zola after years of wide-spread moral indignation. Not that Zola's novels were not a commercial success, a fact which Robertson notes at the opening of his paper; but, he argues, that success has largely been 'a success of scandal'. In France as much as in England, Zola was and continued to be generally read for the wrong reasons: either for the sake of relishing his 'improprieties', or for the more subtle pleasure of being able to denounce the improprieties after perusal. Robertson, who with his defence of Henry Vizetelly in 1889 had already shown where he stood with regard to Zola's morals, now argued that the continuing emphasis on the supposedly 'scandalous' aspects of the French author's work had obscured the true issue at stake: the evaluation of Zola's status and merit as a literary artist. It is this task which Robertson sets himself in his paper.

First of all, Robertson establishes the central principle which unites the many volumes of *Les Rougon-Macquart*:

> Here is a sociological as well as an artistic purpose; and both the sociology and the art are in a manner implicated in the scheme of heredity which is put forward as uniting the whole, the ramifications of the Rougon-Macquart being treated as expressive of a law or laws of heredity. [21]

Robertson, much of whose work is devoted to exposing the workings of non-religious causality in history, must have recognized in Zola a fellow-spirit. It is the application of the unifying causal principle of heredity which, on the

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[123] See also the essay Robertson published on Eliot in *Progress*, 1 (1883), pp. 381–4; 2 (1883), pp. 57–61, 117–23.

[124] *Criticisms*, II, pp. 16–36. Page numbers referring to this reprint are given in square brackets in the main text. Robertson's paper is a polished version of a review of the translation of Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal*, published in the *National Reformer* (6, 13, 20 August 1893), pp. 81–2, 97–8, 113–14.

whole, raises Zola above his great precursor Balzac. In comparison with Zola, who creates 'a great scientific art scheme', Balzac's body of work is 'straggling and uncertain, like the researches of early science'. [29] Although both authors are to be applauded for recognizing that 'mind, temperaments, are functions of bodies', Zola had the advantage of being able to benefit from the findings of his 'more scientific generation' in founding his survey of an age on the biological principle of heredity. [30]

Robertson is not blind to the disadvantages of such a grand unifying scheme. He recognizes that a 'definite science of heredity' was not as yet in sight, and, more importantly, that the requirements of art and science tended to clash at a fundamental level. Zola might aim at the objective, realistic portrayal of the 'pathology' of his characters, but the fact that art demands a 'sense of symmetry and satisfying order' sometimes results in 'a monstrous strain on our sense of probability'. Robertson questions, for instance, the scientific likelihood of a woman like Aunt Dide, mother of the first Rougon and Macquarts and subjected to the worst rigours of life, living to the ripe old age of 105. Clearly, it is the 'instinct for symmetry, the plan of the series' which causes such a departure from the realistic depiction of life. [30–31]

Nonetheless, Robertson finds Zola's scheme on the whole 'greatly conceived', and proceeds to ask how it should be criticized in more detail. He enumerates a number of fundamental issues:

> Over such a scheme as Zola's the main questions to be raised are questions of power, insight and judgment. Does he seize with any broad truthfulness the society of the Second Empire? Does he see human beings in their relations to each other? Is his ethical grasp of life commensurate with the range of his artistic study? Does he help us to unify impressions? Does he widen our grasp of life? And does he all the while give us the artistic impression, making us feel that his people stand on their feet and are drawn in the round? [22]

Robertson does not see how these questions can be answered with anything other than a resounding 'yes', unless the moral issue of Zola's supposed 'faults of taste' [23] should be allowed to obscure the critic's judgment. No one, Robertson argues, now denies Shakespeare or Dante genius, whereas obviously 'Shakspere somewhat relished the lubricious, and Dante distinctly relished the horrible.' In Zola's case, one might therefore legitimately ask whether he depicted 'vice and evil under the Second Empire with either relish or moral indifference'. [24]

Robertson admits that the answer is not entirely an easy one, in the sense that in his view, Zola does indeed tend 'overmuch to pessimism in his

estimates of life, tends to dwell overmuch on the evil and to overlook the good.' However, Zola's approach is ultimately validated by the fact that the fundamental question 'Does he set forth evil that really exists?' can only be answered in the affirmative:

> The vice and corruption portrayed by Zola are actual, not only in France, especially the France of last generation, but in England and other countries in varying degrees. The degradation and animalism of the peasantry, the corruption and baseness of the middle class and the rich, the instability and vice of the town workers – these are the fruits not merely of Imperialism but of commercialism – let us say of unrationalised society under any *régime*. [25]

With his novels, Robertson feels, Zola makes a genuine contribution to 'curing social evils', and those who argue that the novel is not the place to do this forget that 'art is finally indefinable, or rather illimitable: it is for ever extending itself.' In the end, 'Zola really quashes the argument that art ought not to do certain things, by doing them.' [27]

However, Zola's exposure of social evils alone does not make him a great artist. Robertson is well aware that 'Art is lost when in the name of science the artist makes his personages mere mouthpieces of doctrines, missing portraiture while professing to give it.' Zola to him is not a social scientist who happens to write novels, but 'always fundamentally an artist', whose characters are vividly alive even if at times they are used to advance the author's views. It is, in fact, in the first place Zola's command of 'the great physical facts of life' [32], his ability to make objective observation come to life in a consummate work of art, which makes him a great artist, and, as Robertson concludes, 'one of the great imaginative writers of modern Europe.' [36]

Zola's naturalism, with its frank exposure of social abuses grounded on scientific principles, was clearly well-calculated to appeal to the rationalist critic J.M. Robertson, as was French realism in general. 'Beside the impassiveness and impersonalness of workers like Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Daudet, and Maupassant,' Robertson declared, 'our latter-day novelists figure as lacking in balance and weight, as capricious, egotistic, wayward.'[125] [28] Although his progressionist ideology made Zola's pessimism and emphasis on the darker side of human nature slightly distasteful to him – he was enough of a Victorian for that – he could not but voice his appreciation of Zola's work, which, with its emphasis on scientific causality, embodied precisely the kind of

[125] Robertson was particularly appreciative of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, of which he wrote (*ETCM*, p. 112) that there was 'nothing vivider and truer in fiction'.

unifying philosophy he had found missing in the novels of W.D. Howells. Robertson therefore deserves to be mentioned alongside better-known critics like George Moore, Vernon Lee, Arthur Symons, and Havelock Ellis as one of the first critics to demand serious attention for Zola from the English public and critics.[126]

Robertson on Stevenson

As a novel critic in the 1880s and 1890s, Robertson could hardly avoid taking position in the debate on realism and romance which then raged in the periodical press. In his criticism of the period, he pays considerable attention to the rise to fame of Stevenson as exemplifying the growing taste for the rejuvenated genre of the romance.[127] As we follow Robertson's criticism of Stevenson throughout the last two decades of the century, it will become apparent that his position in the debate was not a stable one, but, in fact, shifted from outspoken appreciation of the romance as practised by Stevenson to equally outspoken condemnation of the genre as different practitioners came to occupy the centre of the stage.

In 1885, Robertson showed himself particularly enamoured of the most recent work by Robert Louis Stevenson, to the extent that, after a sympathetic appraisal of George Moore's naturalist novel *The Mummer's Wife*, he was brought to concede that 'realism is not everything, even in fiction.'[128] He hailed Stevenson's 'Prince Otto' as 'perhaps the most excellent book of the year', although it was a story 'in which, save for the descriptions of scenery and the peculiar vividness of all the figure-painting, there is no realism whatever; . . . and in which hardly one character is really possible.' In Robertson's view, Stevenson's manifest abilities as a 'masterly and original story-teller' and as 'the master of a quite incomparable style' more than made up for his deviations from the realist rule, especially since the author also displayed adequate moral fibre in 'a curious, chivalrous wisdom, at once keen and gracious, that entirely conquers a reader's esteem.' Robertson's final, enthusiastic verdict is that 'It is permeated by that fugitive something we call

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[126] See Decker, *The Victorian Conscience*, pp. 106–11.

[127] Robertson was highly appreciative of the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the great American romancist of an earlier generation, whom he called 'nearly the first great novelist of the psychological school, and still the most individual' (*Modern Humanists*, p. 112). Unfortunately, Robertson never discussed Hawthorne at any length; the short article which appears in the first volume of *Criticisms* (pp. 28–35) is mainly a review of Moncure D. Conway's biography, and has little to say about Hawthorne's novels.

[128] 'English Literature in 1885', *National Reformer* (3 January 1886), p. 3. The following quotes in this paragraph are from the same page.

genius' and he does not hesitate to compare Stevenson with Mozart and Schubert.

One year later, Robertson's enthusiasm does not appear to have waned, as the following aside from his review of Shaw's *Cashel Byron's Profession* shows:

> Keeping out of the reckoning his incomparable "Treasure Island", which is neither realism nor the other thing, but simply a first-rate story of adventure, the last perfection of its type, we have in his "New Arabian Nights" stories, and in still better shape in his "Prince Otto", a species of fiction in which there is no pretence, artistically speaking, of real reproduction of life; in which none of the personages can be said to be conceivable; but in which, nevertheless, there is a constant and telling analysis of human nature in the abstract, this being yet achieved with all the zest and sparkle that can be infused into animated dramatic narrative. It is the kind of effect we have in Shakspere. In the regions of Gerolstein and maritime Bohemia we find ourselves face to face with true human passion and folly, strength and weakness, foible and magnanimity, all playing in admirably projected character-types, none of whom can we really imagine ourselves meeting in the flesh.[129]

Realism, in other words, need not necessarily be the only way fiction can achieve true insight into man's moral nature; in the hands of a genius like Stevenson, the romance may serve such a purpose equally well.

In spite of such an unexpectedly tolerant attitude towards Stevenson's chosen fictional genre, Robertson's overview of the Scotsman's work at the end of 1886 betrays some initial signs of dissatisfaction with the artistic scope of the romance. Praise of *Kidnapped* is this time followed by the more cautionary statement that 'A writer who can turn out such pieces of perfect work might perchance be the great novelist of the immediate future, if his genius permitted him to alter his bent from the production of first-rate stories of incident to a comprehensive fictional treatment of life.'[130] Two years later, in an article on 'The Position of English Literature', Robertson now more explicitly expresses his regret that Stevenson should choose to devote his talents to 'the novel of adventure', with its lack of moral and psychological subtlety: 'One day it will be seen to be a pity that such gifts for fiction should not have been brought to bear, in fiction as otherwise, on what Wordsworth was thinking of when he said that Scott's poetry would die because he had

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[129] 'Cashel Byron's Profession', *Our Corner*, 7 (1886), p. 303.

[130] 'Literature in 1886', *National Reformer* (26 December 1886), p. 404.

addressed nothing to "the immortal part of man".'[131] Finally, in 1889, Robertson regretfully states that 'It is probably idle . . . to hope that Mr. Stevenson will alter his method and turn realist.'[132] By this time, Robertson has clearly come to feel that the romance is in the end an inadequate vehicle for giving artistic expression to the greater moral truths of man's existence, and he takes it as a sign of the general creative dearth in English literature that it should thus have come to dominate the literary scene.

Whereas Robertson admitted that Stevenson, in spite of his (in the end) regrettable predilection for the romance, could at least boast of great potential as a novelist, that much was regrettably not to be said for a fellow-romancist like H. Rider Haggard. In the opening essay on 'Science in Criticism' in *ETCM*, Robertson launches an attack on Andrew Lang for his passionate advocacy of the romance as exemplified by Haggard's work, asking himself how 'a reader with Mr. Lang's culture can possibly fail to recognize the bankruptcy of Mr. Haggard in all the higher qualities even of the romance-writer; his essential vulgarity of plan, aim, and method'.[133] If even Stevenson could not finally raise the romance to an art-form of the highest moral and intellectual standing, in the hands of a writer like Rider Haggard it could only degenerate into mere sensational bed-time reading for schoolboys. Moreover, looking back on the rise of the romance in an essay on 'The Murder Novel' in 1899, Robertson concluded that romancists like Haggard, Anthony Hope and Robert Cromie had engendered a general taste for murder and bloodshed in literature which was not without its effect on the psychological novel such as practised by Mrs. Humphrey Ward and Thomas Hardy.[134] On the whole, it seems no more than likely that Robertson's aversion to the sensationalist English romancists reinforced his feeling that the future of the novel was in the hands of the realists, and in particular of the French and Russian realists.

Robertson on Kipling

In 1890, Robertson witnessed the arrival on the English literary scene of Rudyard Kipling, the author who, according to Edmund Gosse, so successfully bridged the gap between realism and romance. To Robertson, Kipling's quick rise to popularity was a sign that 'We are still sinking in the quality of our general fiction.'[135] On the one hand, he could not deny that 'There is much

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[131] 'The Position of English Literature', *National Reformer* (1 January 1888), p. 5.

[132] 'Stevenson's Minor Works: II. The Tales', in *Criticisms*, II, p. 59.

[133] *ETCM*, p. 139.

[134] 'The Murder Novel', in *Criticisms*, I, p. 131.

[135] 'Literature in 1890', *National Reformer* (28 December 1890), pp. 402–3.

cleverness in the new writer, a great deal of observation of character, and a happy knack of catching style.' On the other hand, he found in Kipling 'an entire adaptation to ordinary Philistine taste, and a plain incapacity to write a great novel.' On no account could Kipling ever aspire to being a great artist in the class of Turgenev, George Eliot, or Zola:

> All these, in their very different ways, strike deep into life: Mr. Kipling's vein is clearly the sentimental psychology of a thoroughly artificial society, the art of a dealer in the decorative and the *chic*. One must go to the French to describe Mr. Kipling's art: it is *pimpant*; the art of a great talent with a cheap culture and a flashy environment.[136]

Although professing to offer his readers a slice of actual life, Kipling in effect gave his readers only a 'diluted realism', thus achieving great popularity with a public 'which in art buys piquant and flashy "story–pictures" and anecdotal sculpture'.[137] In an article on 'Russian and English Fiction',[138] Robertson compared Kipling's *The Light that Failed* unfavourably with a novel entitled *A Russian Priest* by the unknown Russian novelist E.N. Potapenko, whom he praises for being 'as austere, as genuine, as the best Frenchmen'.[139] In comparison, Kipling 'recalls an artist who goes in for trick–work in paint; he sacrifices observation to piquant effect, struggles to look knowing, forces the lights and the shadows and the color, and in general seeks to titillate the nerves of the average diner–out rather than to convince the subtle observers and the good readers.'[140] Such a form of realism has really no more to do with the accurate representation of life than the romance, a genre which it thus approximates in its aim to please the average reader.

Robertson elaborated on this theme in an article on 'Kipling and his World' which he wrote over a decade later for the *Indian Review*, and which was reprinted in the *Reformer* in 1904.[141] It is opened by the statement that if there

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[136] *Ibid.*

[137] *Ibid.*

[138] *Criticisms*, II, pp. 70–82. Robertson's discussion of Kipling's work here is partly copied from the article on 'Literature in 1890', *National Reformer* (28 December 1890).

[139] *Ibid.*, p. 78. Robertson mentions that this novel was edited and translated by W. Gaussen, and appeared in London in 1891 as part of T. Fisher–Unwin's *Pseudonym Library*, 56 vols (London, [1890]–1903).

[140] *Ibid.*

[141] 'Kipling and his World', *Reformer*, 6 (1904), pp. 321–33. In a footnote, it is mentioned that the article is reprinted from the *Indian Review*. In 1905, it was issued as a pamphlet under the title *Rudyard Kipling. A Criticism* by G.A. Natesan & Co. in Madras, the publisher of the *Indian Review*. The page numbers in square brackets in the main text refer to the *Reformer*.

is one reason for the general admiration by which Kipling's work is met, it is 'the sense of *reality* set up by his writing':

> No writer of English fiction, perhaps, has ever shown greater power of at once imagining so intensely and wording so richly as to make the reader's vision no less instantaneous than his own. This is indeed the master gift of all great writers of drama and fiction; and Shakspere and Thackeray[142] exhibit it on planes of psychology which Mr. Kipling never reaches. But while their artistic level thus entirely transcends his, his intensity and lucidity of expression on his own plane is quite equal to theirs. The one species of intellectual discipline which he seems to have given himself is the discipline of style, in the sense of the search for color and force in vocabulary and nervous concision in phrase, and the result is quite masterly in its kind. [321]

But this profession of admiration for Kipling's stylistic powers, is, of course, only a 'recul pour meilleur sauter'. It may very well be true that Kipling represents speeches and actions so that they have the semblance of reality, but his overall merit as an artist in fiction is to be measured by the question: 'Does his work add a total and enveloping truth to its primary function in the matter of verisimilitude of detail?' [323] What Robertson looks for in the realist in fiction (and what he found, for instance, in George Eliot and Zola, but not in Howells) is again the 'unifying philosophy', the large moral vision which raises a work above the mere representation of realistic detail:

> When we seek in what holds its ground through the ages as great literature, for the moral constituents of such greatness, they are found to include in especial a sense of the illusoriness of human hates and vanities and triumphs, and an elevation of spirit that challenges the reader to transcend the motives and ideals they involve. [328]

The final critical test for a work of fiction is, in short, 'its total exhibition of moral judgment' [323]; Robertson states plainly that he does not believe in the theory that art is separate from morality, and since Kipling 'has deliberately chosen to meddle in morals, to pose as a teacher and leader no less than as a limner of life' [331], he deserves to be judged as such.

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[142] Like Hawthorne, Thackeray is a a novelist Robertson valued extremely highly, but about whom he never wrote a major essay. In the short article on Thackeray which appears in volume two of *Criticisms* (pp. 37–45), Robertson praises his 'genius for portraiture' (p. 44), but mainly concentrates on his life and personality.

Robertson – after all, the author of the pro–Boer *Wrecking the Empire* (1901) – shows particular repugnance at Kipling's imperialist, jingoist tendencies, as so many critics after him have done:

> To begin with, Mr. Kipling is always vaunting. Even when he writes a story to oppose the ineptitude of some types of British officer, or to confess the possibilities of military miscarriage among untrained British troops, the picture is always planned to bring out the signal superiority of the "Race" under proper conditions. . . . His normal state is vainglory. And the worst of it is that the vainglory is not that simple pride in his own race which might pass as primary human emotion: it always goes doubled with an entirely vulgar hatred for other races. [329]

Robertson is willing to grant Kipling his 'flashes of higher inspiration and aspiration', among which he ranges his *Recessional*, but on the whole he finds him 'beyond the pale of great art', because of 'his intellectual limitations, which keep him school–boyish, parochial, morally vulgar in his total relation to life and to his fellow–men.' [332] Of all the novelists of the age Robertson criticizes, Kipling – the epitome of 'political incorrectness' in Robertsonian terms – is without a doubt the one who rouses him to the greatest degree of moral indignation. His response to Kipling brings out most emphatically that to Robertson, realism cannot be separated from morality.

Robertson on Conrad

Robertson's article on 'Kipling and his World' seems to stand almost alone as an effort on Robertson's part to deal critically with a major novelist after the turn of the century. However, he had far from lost his interest in the novel in general and in the problem of realism in particular, which is demonstrated by the article he published on 'The Novels of Joseph Conrad' in 1918 in the *North American Review*,[143] as well as by his extensive correspondence with Richard Curle (1883–1968), who is best known as Conrad's close friend and the author of a number of influential studies on Conrad's life and work, but who was also a prolific writer of travel books, short stories, and novels in his own right. Robertson's correspondence with Curle may in fact be read as providing relevant background material to the article, since it deals with problems of realism which are also central to Robertson's discussion of Conrad's work.

Robertson's letters to Curle (of which unfortunately only Robertson's side has been preserved) span a period of 25 years, from 1904 to 1929. The

[143] 'The Novels of Joseph Conrad', *North American Review*, 208 (1918), pp. 439–53.

particular interest of these letters lies in the fact that these are the only known personal documents by Robertson's hand in which literary matters (other than technicalities of Shakespeare scholarship) are extensively discussed. At the start of the correspondence, Curle was a young man trying to make his way into the literary world by writing criticism and short stories, who clearly looked to Robertson as a literary mentor. He sent the older man his literary efforts, and Robertson, taking his role very seriously, meted out detailed and frequently far from mild criticism in return (all clearly offered, it should be stressed, with the best of intentions and coupled with generous praise). Curle professed himself a follower of the strictest realism in fiction, and it is around the question of the exact meaning of realism that the most interesting literary discussion in the correspondence revolves.

On 10 October 1910, Robertson responded to a short story which Curle had sent him a week before, and in which, judging from Robertson's reaction, Curle had painstakingly tried to represent the workings of an insane brain. Robertson showed himself quite unsympathetic to his young friend's effort:

> Is insanity a theme for artistic treatment? How can you claim to know how a mad brain works? If you are as true to life here as in a presentment of sane experience, you are doing a bit of pathological science, not a piece of art work. If you are not faithful to fact, what is it you are doing? Madness is pathologically, not humanly interesting. And you can't pretend to know – to have any basis. A man who had been mad, and recovered, could give valuable details: your speculation can only be a tour de force.

Robertson admits that in *Maud*, Tennyson had taken his hero through madness, but points out as a vital difference that this was 'literary madness – musical throughout, a mere raising to wildness of the natural feelings', not 'genuine' madness. Judging from the long letter Robertson wrote four days later, Curle had defended himself by presenting several examples of madness in literature which he felt might be called genuine, King Lear among them. Robertson, however, does not budge:

> The madness of Lear is literary, not a "document in madness" at all. Shakespeare puts in his mouth wildly sane indictments of life, readable as such, with just touches of lunacy enough to keep up the illusion of madness; and it is Lear's return to sanity that crowns all, as regards our view of him.

Once more we see that to Robertson, the mere representation, however accurate, of an aspect of reality such as insanity is of little interest, and that he demands much more of the art of fiction.

What exactly it is he demands is outlined in his letter to Curle of 16 July 1912. In letters of 7 March and 10 July 1912, occasioned by new literary efforts on Curle's part, he had repeated his argument concerning literary madness with such emphasis that Curle had taken offence, and Robertson was now driven to restate his case more clearly. What he found missing in Curle's work was 'motive', which, he argued, should not be mistaken for 'plot', but simply meant the kind of 'intelligible coherence' an actual transcription of life could not offer:

> You seem to argue that because life is merely stupid and nugatory, it suffices to transcribe stupidity and inanity for artistic purposes. Surely you will not hold to this. To make an artistic whole, great or small, there must be selection and combination: the stupidity must either be a foil to something else or be in itself so piquant as to constitute a theme, like a good portrait of an ugly face. Fatuity in itself is repellent: to make it matter of artistic satisfaction (as in Jane Austen's fools) there must be humorous handling and planned contrast.

It is 'the artistic selection of the actual' which Robertson states as 'the greatest kind of art', and it is in this direction that he tries to steer Curle, 'away from the wilfully bizarre, the obscure, the disordered, the insane', and towards 'consequentness'.

From the correspondence with Curle, it becomes clear that Robertson's ideal in fiction is to no small extent embodied by the work of Joseph Conrad. In a letter of 23 April 1913 he exhorts Curle to follow Conrad's example: 'Look at Conrad's own hold on actuality: it is that no less than style which makes him. And he is actual without being ordinary – no man is less so.' Four years later, on 15 December 1917, Robertson reports to Curle that he has undertaken to write a short paper on 'The Novels of Joseph Conrad' for the Rainbow Circle, and it is probable that it was this paper which served as the basis for the article that appeared in the *North American Review* almost a year later.[144]

Robertson opens his article by observing that Conrad's critical success is an encouraging sign that 'English appreciation has greatly quickened and widened in the past hundred years.' [439] After all, Conrad's art is 'much less facile in its appeal, is far more austerely unappealing, than that of almost any of the men of imaginative literary genius of the last century.' [440] In that sense, his case is similar to that of Meredith, whose – admittedly late – success can also hardly be explained by his appeal to popular taste. Both authors 'are not of the tribe of

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[144] Page numbers referring to this article are given in square brackets in the main text. For the Rainbow Circle, see Chapter 1.

entertainers; they try the spirit and toil the judgment, offering not pass–time but pilgrimage.' [440] However, in several respects Meredith finds his superior in Conrad. Whereas Meredith 'developed vices of style almost unparalleled in our previous literary history, till it became an affliction to read him',[145] Conrad immediately asserted himself as 'a born writer, a born master of language'. [441] Moreover, and more importantly, Conrad's travels as a sailor to distant parts of the globe have given him a much wider perspective on life in all its various aspects, so that he finally represents a unique case, combining 'an intense susceptibility to the appeal of environment, the flow of things outward' with 'a no less intense inner life of imaginative reconstruction'. [441]

In Conrad, 'the two faculties of perception and conception, vision and reproduction' achieve 'a spontaneous union', thus constituting an essential characteristic of his art:

> To his intense perceptivity, everything in nature is in relation to life; every living thing at the same time independently alive; every person a world in himself. . . . His is a universal response to all visible phenomena; he might be, on that side, a painter or a man of science; it is on his two sides of vision of Nature and the living, and imaginative reconstruction, that he is a novelist. As he puts it in the suppressed preface to his *Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, the true artist's work is "a simple–minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth manifold and one, underlying its every aspect." [442]

Robertson draws a parallel with painting, giving the example of 'a picture of a cow, by one . . . of the Marises, which I am disposed to call one of the most spiritual paintings I have ever seen.' This picture is much more than outward reality captured in paint, it is 'an embodied effluence, a natural incarnation, a transfiguration.' Compared to this, 'the notorious Bull of Paul Potter' is no more than 'a monstrous eleograph,[146] representing so many hundred–weights of beef, with the skin on.' Whereas Potter's picture represents 'false realism' to Robertson, the first, like Conrad's novels, exemplifies 'idealistic realism'. [443]

Robertson elaborates on this thesis by pointing out a number of instances in which Conrad achieves an effect of realism through unrealistic devices. In *Lord Jim*, for instance, Marlow as the actual narrator of the entire story is hardly

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[145] See also Robertson's article 'Concerning Preciosity', *Yellow Book*, 13 (1897), pp. 79–106. The final section of this article provides a detailed analysis of Meredith's 'unhappy style'.

[146] A printing error; the correct spelling is 'oleograph'.

credible, 'Marlow is reciting written Conrad.' [444] However, the goal is always to create an effect of artistic illusion. Likewise, in *Nostromo*, it is impossible to believe in the literal truth of the narrative when 'Martin Decoud, after forty hours of intense strain and excitement in the insurrection, sits down in the night, in the café of Viola, by the light of one candle, to write to his sister in Paris a small novel, describing it all.' [444] However, this is all a matter of literary machinery; in actual fact, in the case of *Nostromo*, 'The very device of making Decoud write his story of the episode is employed to heighten the sense of reality, to give the special illusion of actuality by making one of the actors in the episode give it out in terms of his own doings and vivid sensations.' [444–445]

Robertson finds another main element of Conrad's conception of the technique of the novel in his use of 'atmosphere':

> The word comes from the technical criticism of painting, where it posits the requirement that a picture, as distinct from a portrait, shall present persons or objects in a framed space of light and air. That lacking, completeness of truth is lacking. In fiction, the cognate effect is that of physical and moral background, environment, "stagesetting." To an artist constituted as Conrad is, the provision of such atmosphere is a matter of course. For him the organism and the environment are a composite whole, and he simply cannot provide an event without framing it in a scene which for him is in vital relation to it. [445]

Sometimes, the effect of this technique of 'backgrounding' can be somewhat strained, as when, in *Nostromo*, the parrot is made to cry 'Viva Costaguana' when Charles and Mrs. Gould are speaking of the country. However, it is completely successful in presenting the characters, whom we 'come to know . . . as we know them in life, by gradual intercourse: backward–looking revelations come only after we have become acquainted with the man as he lives.' Dr. Monygham, again in *Nostromo*, provides a typical example: 'we meet him a dozen times, with hints of a past many times withheld, till at the stage of his active entry into the plot it is all told with a concentrated intensity that suggests a novel used up for an incidental record.' [446]

Robertson's final summing up of Conrad's achievement makes explicit those views on realism which were mostly implicit in his earlier criticism as discussed in these pages:

> The final impression left by Conrad's art then, is that of greatness, of tragic intensity, of vivid realization of life and circumstance, of invincible patience in the artistic reproduction, albeit there are miscalculations in the matter of the machinery, such as lesser

> artists would in general shun. In calling him a realist, we are noting that he is an intense observer of reality, and is inspired by the spectacle of life. But this is the Shakespearean realism which does not merely reproduce or manipulate reality but imagines in terms of true vision; and in that sense he is equally an idealist . . . What I mean is that if it should be said that many of Conrad's characters are rather ideal than observed personalities, I should not offer a negative, but claim that his power lies in making the ideal pass as real. [449]

According to Robertson, the effect of Conrad's idealism is to create characters who are 'more memorable, than the more receptive and transcriptive things beside them, as Juliet is more memorable than the Nurse, or Rosalind than Audrey, or Hamlet than Polonius.' Robertson does, however, make a notable and interesting exception for Conrad's women characters, in whom the novelist seems interested 'mainly as sufferers or victims', and with whom he appears to have 'fewer points of sympathy' than with men. Robertson feels that Mrs. Gould in *Nostromo*, for instance, is neither truly 'observed' nor effectively 'idealized', however 'attractive and admirable in character' she may be. Conrad, Robertson concludes, 'has never matched Eugénie Grandet.' [450]

At the end of his essay, Robertson turns to the question whether *Nostromo* or *Lord Jim* deserves to be called Conrad's masterpiece. Although he finally dismisses such a contest as irrelevant, he does proceed to give a number of reasons for placing *Nostromo* below *Lord Jim*. Mainly, he does not feel the character of Nostromo can carry the weight of the novel, so that, to reverse metaphors, 'The pedestal is too great for the titular figure.' Robertson perceives that Nostromo is 'a kind of flawed embodiment of commonplace distinction, ironically presented as the dominating or central figure' but has to conclude that 'this very irony . . . tends to lower the ultimate psychic impression' so that 'the effort to develop the case of Nostromo in the latter part of the book leaves a sense of relative artificiality and strained ingenuity.' [451] The book, in all its panoramic breadth of conception, thus lacks a centre, so that 'The high centrality of *Lord Jim*, where the story turns on one pivot, leaves the profounder if not the larger impression.' Moreover, Robertson takes issue with Conrad's depiction of the revolution in Costaguana, which he finds limited in the sense that 'the collective play of forces in a community' [452] has not been given sufficient attention.

However, in Robertson's consideration these are relatively minor points (although they seem relevant enough in themselves), which do not detract from his conclusion that 'Conrad has written no feeble book or story, has stamped with distinction all he has produced, and has absolutely respected his art.' [453] Robertson, it is clear, found in Conrad the author who, of all contemporary

fictionists working in English, most completely exemplified his ideal of the realist novelist.

Conclusions

As the foregoing samples of his criticism of fiction have tried to demonstrate, Robertson's position in the late–Victorian debate on realism is a rather ambiguous one. On the one hand we see him take the side of the more progressive developments of the age. Although he has serious reservations about Howells's final success as a realist, Robertson cannot but applaud the American's efforts as a step in the right direction. In Zola's adoption of scientific principles in fiction, combined with an overriding concern for social issues, he recognizes the future of the novel, at a time when Zola was still widely (though no longer generally) vilified in England as a danger to the nation's moral character. Robertson himself was always defiantly unconcerned about his reputation or position in the literary world, so that Mrs. Grundy never stood in his way as far as expressing controversial opinions was concerned. The least insular of critics, he looked abroad for his examples, to America, France, and Russia, and held them up to the English public without any fear of stepping on nationalist toes. As a matter of fact, a confirmed nationalist like Kipling could count on Robertson's openly and forcibly expressed scorn.

On the other hand, one cannot help but feel that Robertson is substantially in agreement with the idealist realism of the mid–Victorian generation of George Eliot and G.H. Lewes. In fact, one might say that as Robertson grew older, he became more and more outspoken in his preference for the older tradition of realism, so that in the essay on Conrad, we finally find him making his most explicit statement on his idealist position in the realist debate. The fact that Robertson should choose to criticize fiction from this vantage–point is in itself hardly surprising. As a rationalist and a moralist, Robertson's sympathies could finally only be with the developments in fiction which not only ensured progress in the art–form of the novel itself, but also showed the way to progress for society as a whole. Robertson could not but respect the consummate craftsmanship of Stevenson's romances, but in the end he felt strongly that romance could never offer any new insight into human nature and relations, and was therefore a mere diversion, not unpleasant in itself, from the road to progress.

It is to be regretted that Robertson did not decide to follow the developments in fiction more closely after the turn of the century. His essay on Conrad shows him capable of offering both detailed and wide–ranging criticism in a lively style, unhampered by heavy–handed excursions into controversy to which Robertson is admittedly often prone. His appreciation of Conrad is entirely genuine, yet he can criticize a novel like *Nostromo* with the detachment

required for an effective and detailed evaluation. It would have been particularly interesting to observe Robertson's response to the rise of modernism after the War, but while it seems certain that Robertson could hardly have been unaware of such a major development, his reaction, unfortunately, does not appear to have been recorded. Whether this is in itself a significant fact may be food for speculation; such as they are, Robertson's accomplishments as a critic of fiction are sufficiently valuable to merit a place in the history of literary criticism.

Part 3: Robertson on Poetry

Introduction

From the very start of Robertson's career as a critic and journalist, poetry was to him a vital concern. In the 1880s and 1890s in particular, Robertson's most prolific years when it comes to literary criticism, he wrote frequently and voluminously about poets and the art of poetry, so that, in fact, his output on poetry far exceeds that on fiction in bulk. Robertson's earliest documented publication was a diminutive anthology of Wordsworth entitled *Winnowings from Wordsworth* which saw the light in Edinburgh in 1883. One year later, he contributed a fifty–two–page treatise on *Walt Whitman, Poet and Democrat* to the *Round Table Series*, again published in Edinburgh. In the following two decades, Robertson wrote extensively on poetry in *Our Corner*, *Progress*, *National Reformer*, and his own *Free Review*. The most important of these periodical contributions were reprinted in *ETCM*, in which we find a long essay on 'The Art of Tennyson', and in *NETCM*, where Poe, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Burns receive extensive treatment. In the two volumes of *Criticisms* published in 1902 and 1903, we find short pieces on the poetry of Herrick, Marvell, W.E. Henley, Andrew Lang, Edward Carpenter, Lewis Morris, Tennyson, and Browning, which again mostly started life years earlier in the pages of the periodicals mentioned above, sometimes as reviews of biographies or editions of the collected works of the poet concerned.

Although the greater part of Robertson's output on poetry does indeed date from the final two decades of the nineteenth century, this is not to suggest that his interest in poetry waned in later years. In 1903 he published a volume on a subject close to his heart, *Browning and Tennyson as Teachers*, while in 1911, the year when Asquith appointed him Secretary to the Board of Trade, he still found the time to contribute two crucial essays, 'Form in Poetry' and 'Substance in Poetry', to the *English Review*. His book on *Elizabethan Literature* of 1914 naturally has much to say on the poetry of the age of whose literature he gives a sweeping survey. As late as 1928, Robertson published a

long, two–part essay on 'Burns and his Race' in T.S. Eliot's *Criterion*. In short, one may conclude that poetry continued to be the object of Robertson's critical attention throughout his career, although it should be added that, as tends to be true of Robertson's entire critical work, he essentially never abandoned the critical positions he initially adopted in the 1880s and 1890s. Also, as is the case with his criticism of fiction, the modernist movement appears to have fallen entirely outside his range of attention or interest, so that unfortunately we remain in the dark as regards his possible views on, say, Eliot or Pound. Robertson's interests continue to be those of the late–Victorian man of letters, even when he is writing well into the twentieth century.

The following section on Robertson as a critic of poetry will consist of two parts. In the first, I will examine his views with regard to the complex question of the roles of form and substance in poetic art. As I will attempt to show, this question dominated Robertson's criticism of poetry, and it was essentially on the basis of his approach to it that he built his critical opinions. In the second part, I will present Robertson's specific judgments on a number of poets: Spenser (with some attention to Robertson's views regarding the literary period preceding Romanticism), Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley, Walt Whitman, and Tennyson. As was the case in the section on fiction, this selection is based on my view of the overall depth and representative quality of Robertson's treatment of his subject–matter. What should finally emerge from these pages is a fair impression of Robertson's range as a critic of poetry coupled with insight into the explicit or implicit ideas and assumptions underlying his critical judgments.

Robertson on Form and Substance in Poetry

For someone acquainted with Robertson's criticism of drama and fiction, in which, as I have tried to demonstrate, the rationalist's moral bias is in evidence throughout, it may come as a considerable surprise that in his criticism of poetry, Robertson goes to great lengths to convince his readers that there is no self–evident connection between morality and poetry. In particular, he castigates the poets of all ages for their tendency, as he sees it, 'to be forever under the burden of an aspiration to teach, to influence, to sway and guide'.[147] Again and again throughout his criticism of poetry he reiterates his deeply–felt conviction that 'Poets . . . are not by rights teachers.'[148] Morality and poetry, he admonishes his readers and fellow critics, belong to distinctly different spheres, and any attempt to fuse them violates the very nature of the art–form. It is in

[147] 'Form in Poetry', *English Review*, 8 (1911), p. 396.
[148] *Browning and Tennyson as Teachers*, p. 1.

the 'field of aesthetics' alone that 'poetry as such can be judged', and 'to frame for it alien laws' would mean 'the surrender of its right to existence'. This is not only true of poetry, Robertson finds, but, in fact, of art in a much wider sense: 'To make instruction the first instead of the last function of any of the fine arts is to bring them as arts to naught. This much must always be maintained, in the endless discussion as to the relations of art and morality.'[149] Thus we unexpectedly find Robertson adopting a critical position which appears to be diametrically opposed to the moralist tendencies so far laid bare in his criticism of drama and fiction, as well as to his theoretical position towards aesthetic literary criticism as discussed in Part 2 of the previous chapter. While in answering the question 'how to live' Shakespeare and Zola may apparently act as valuable guides, this is not to be expected from poets like, say, Wordsworth or Tennyson.

Robertson even goes so far as to state that, in fact, the poet is particularly unfit to act as a teacher of moral lessons, since 'not only is he not specially a moral influence, but he tends not infrequently to be an anti–moral one.' This, Robertson explains, is a normal function of the respective natures of morality and art:

> The essence of morality is an anxious comparison and control of the impulse of conduct, to the end of perfecting action as between man and man. The essence or ideal of art commonly so–called is the perfecting of an action pursued for itself and its outcome apart from the artist's human relations.[150]

Since it is, according to Robertson, the essence of art to reflect only on itself, in a way that may be termed a–social, the artist cannot be expected to be the natural guardian of morality, which is primarily a social phenomenon:

> . . . it stands to reason that while the artist, working in ideas and sensations aloof from human communion, *may* be constitutionally a highly moralised type, there is no security in his work for his becoming so, and there is a fair chance that he shall not clearly realise moral responsibilities. Moral indifferentism, in fact, might be regarded as the special defect to his special quality; just as it is to be said that the moralist, though he *may* have great artistic gifts, is on the whole more likely to lack them.[151]

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[149] *Ibid.*
[150] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[151] *Ibid.*

It is hardly surprising, then, that Robertson should have little sympathy with the romantic notion of the poet as one who is uniquely gifted among mankind to unveil deep spiritual truth about human existence through the poetic medium:

> The notion of a poet as a semi–divine personage who gets his rhymes and rhythms from heaven, as it were, and whose function is to convey a superior form of truth to a world whose part it is to listen to him with reverence and allude to him as "the Poet" with a capital P – this view of the matter is no doubt very agreeable to "the Poet," and has naturally received much support from his own deliverances on the subject; but a more rational analysis simply sets such transcendentalism aside, and reckons up the inspired one as an artistic organism of a particular kind, whose very constitution partly incapacitates him for steadiness, solidity, or real depth of thought, but whose work it is to put such ideas as he comes by into the perfectest form he can attain.[152]

So it appears that to Robertson as a rationalist critic of life and art, the poet, whatever his artistic merits, is simply condemned by the very nature of his art to be an inadequate reasoner, and should therefore not be left in charge of the administration of moral truths. In that department, he is but an amateur who might do more damage than good, and the job had better be left to the 'professional' thinkers and teachers of this world, of which Robertson, of course, considered himself not the least prominent.

But not only is the messenger ill–qualified as a moral teacher, the medium itself also does not lend itself to such a task in Robertson's view. The manifold functions poetry once fulfilled have long been distributed among many specialized disciplines which had found their proper medium in prose. Robertson praises prose as 'a realm newly enriched in these latter days by sundry masters, but visibly capable of an incalculable tillage':[153]

> In short, whereas poetry once covered the whole field of culture, and whereas that has step by step been differentiated into history, biography, science, theology, philosophy, criticism, drama, and fiction, there arises the presumption that all forms of ratiocination and propaganda, all efforts towards particular prescription of conduct, all enunciations of creed and gospel, must in time be left to prose, the poet retaining only the field of emotion, which abuts on all the others, but is under a different law.[154]

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[152] 'The Art of Tennyson', in *ETCM*, pp. 259–260.

[153] 'Substance in Poetry', *English Review*, 8 (1911), p. 565.

[154] *Ibid.*, p. 547.

Here we first catch a glimpse of what Robertson considered the true province of poetry: the emotions. It is not the function of poetry to serve as a vehicle for reasoned thought (that is exactly what prose is), but to express impassioned emotions which, as a matter of fact, cannot but get in the way of ratiocination and effective teaching:

> His truth, the poet's truth, is *too* simple, *too* sensuous, *too* passional, to be any such light for men's path as he deems it: it is in reality not truth, whereof the light is white and still, but the explosion of one or other of the coloured fires of instinct, out of which truth is to be subtly elicited by a slow and difficult alchemy. Therefore it is that we can never certificate poetry either by its reasoning, logically considered, or by its precept, morally considered; for on both lines it must somewhere break down as surely as it is poetry.
>
> The essence of the matter is just this, that poetry is the utterance of an emotion, and that, whereas perceptions of truth and wisdom have their emotional efflux like any other, not only does that grade of emotion yield the poet a much less facile stimulant than the emotions of instinct, but the process of developing the emotion for its own sake ends in reducing it to the level of any other passion, and the truth and the wisdom are left out of the circuit.[155]

Considering Robertson's emphasis on the emotional as opposed to the rationalist bias displayed by the poet, it is perhaps rather surprising to find Robertson stating elsewhere that 'the poet as such is a realistic, or, in the non–philosophical sense, a materialistic instead of an idealistic person.' What he means, in fact, is that the poet does not take the abstract, the world of ideas, as his subject–matter, but that he has the concrete task of giving 'the sensuous and the passionate their most refined and ennobled expression.'[156] The poet is not a philosopher, but rather a craftsman who uses the resources of language as the tools to transform his emotional material into poetry. This line of reasoning leads Robertson to various definitions of poetry and its function which strongly favour form over substance:

> Poetry is just beautiful metrical speech, speech become beautiful by selection of terms and cadences; and the poet's success lies not in his thinking proper but in the way he expresses his thought.[157]

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[155] *Ibid.*, p. 549.
[156] *Browning and Tennyson as Teachers*, p. 5.
[157] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

> The decisive credentials of perfect poetry are an organic oneness of substance, that substance being of a purer essence than ordinary speech; a quality of meaning which pierces to the sense without the methodic specifications of prose; and a charm of rhythm and phrase which is a boon in itself, permanently recognisable as such apart from any truth enclosed.[158]

> But what is it in poetry that makes us enjoy it, even when we reject its teaching? It is the poet's attainment of loveliness of speech – his artistic achievement – production of beauty which we feel to be admirable irrespective of the truth of the ideas expressed.[159]

Such definitions, scattered throughout Robertson's criticism of poetry, point to an emphatically formalistic approach to poetry, which reminds us that in Robertson's Shakespeare criticism we have already observed a pronounced tendency towards formalism in the advocacy of verse tests (often relying on the individual critic's 'ear' for rhythm) as instruments to establish the true authorship of the plays. Robertson sees the real goal of poetry as the creation of beauty through the skilful manipulation of poetic devices such as rhyme, rhythm, and metre. He rejects the view that form is primarily led by substance; to a considerable extent, it is precisely the opposite which takes place in the creative process:

> The last word on the critical side of the question is that form is not a mere embellishment of substance: it modifies substance: and in the end the ill–formed is found to be at bottom ill–thought, since perfection of thought or teaching is never reached save in perfection of form.[160]

The conclusion thus appears to present itself that we have found in Robertson an unexpected advocate of art for art's sake, for whom form and style provide the final criteria in his critical assessment of poetry.

It was in music that Robertson found the ideal to which he felt poetry should attempt to aspire:

> . . . of all the arts that which has the greatest development before it is music. That alone has the mysterious virtue of lending itself to and giving birth to all emotions in turn without stamping on itself any doctrine, seeming the most profoundly sympathetic because

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[158] 'Poe', in *NETCM*, p. 81.

[159] 'Mr. Browning's "Feristhah's Fancies"', *Our Corner*, 5 (1885), p. 22.

[160] 'Mr. Edward Carpenter', in *Criticisms*, I, p. 95.

> the most utterly undefined. Beethoven can "console" men of all ways of thinking who have the ears to hear him; Mozart is never fallacious; Schubert never immoral.[161]

Music being, in Robertson's view, *only* form and style and nothing besides, it deserved on that count to be placed above poetry in the hierarchy of the arts. Untrammelled by doctrinal discussions (of which, it is worth remembering, no one was fonder than Robertson himself), music attained to a measure of purity which every poet should set himself as the highest standard, and managed to stir the emotions in the most direct way possible. Interestingly, Robertson was also concerned to protect the art of music itself from any ideologically motivated intrusions. Indulging in some evolutionary wishful thinking, he predicted that 'despite the marked taste for chorus–singing, as well as for vocal music generally, such elaborate compositions as the music–drama and the oratorio are types unfitted to survive.'[162] Although he respected Wagner as an important innovator, he asked himself rhetorically 'whether Wagner's poetic treatment of the past is not of the elementary, easy, effortless sort', which constitutes no praise in Robertson's book.[163] Music should simply not lay itself open to doctrinal discussions, and thus show the way to poetry, an art–form even more apt to stray from the strictly formal, stylistic path.

However, if it is the function of poetry to stir the emotions primarily by formal and stylistic means, the question inevitably arises what subject matter, which themes the poet may freely be left to deal with. Robertson appeared well aware of the problem:

> Now, as "immortality" or lasting status is the test by which all poets would best like to succeed, the practical problem for them and their critic is to divine what themes and what handling will best and longest stir assenting emotion – whether impassioned appeal, or brooding reverie, or grave counsel, or ecstatic cry, or impersonal expression and transcription of things and thoughts felt to be beautiful or otherwise memorable.[164]

The answer to him is that the poet should attempt to address universal and timeless emotions, to sing 'the moods that are not merely of the hour and of the newspaper . . . but bind in words emotions of the ages which as such may keep men's sympathy even when another order of emotion reigns.'[165] Such moods

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[161] 'De Mortuis: IV. Tennyson', in *Criticisms*, II, p. 218.
[162] 'The Music of the Future', *Progress*, 4 (1884), p. 283.
[163] *Ibid.*, p. 282.
[164] 'Substance in Poetry', p. 548.
[165] *Ibid.*, p. 549.

might in fact be called up by a great variety of subjects, even such as would appear on the surface to be quite trivial or pedestrian. Taking Wordsworth as an example, Robertson asserts that 'there is nothing anti–poetic in the theme of an idiot boy, any more than in that of a thorn–tree or a solitary reaper.' Not the subject, but 'the quality of emotion that the poet extracts from it'[166] finally determines the appeal of a poem. At this point, the contours of a vicious circle seem to emerge from Robertson's reasoning, since in answering the question how to achieve the highest 'quality of emotion', he again adduces formal criteria: the subject is finally subordinate to its treatment in technical terms. In other words, 'what themes and what handling will best and longest stir assenting emotion' is in the end down to the poet's proficiency in handling form, so that Robertson finds himself back at his starting–point.

Examining Robertson's criteria for perfection in form a little more closely, it turns out that it is to be achieved predominantly in the format of the short lyric. The days of the epic, Robertson contended, were over:

> The modern taste is unmistakeably setting in the direction of short, concentrated, finished poetic effort – a perfectly natural result of the age's scientific scrutiny of belief and of its artistic development. The age of the greatest relative abundance of verse was the age of literary crudity;[167] and there is this justification of the demand for set melodies, that fine lyrics are found to have a more enduring value than any epic, and that even such a poet as Dante is valued chiefly for brief, passionate pathetic passages – that is, for his lyrical quality.[168]

Robertson doubted whether 'poetry can ever be got on a large scale',[169] since no poet, however brilliant, would be able to sustain formal and stylistic perfection throughout a work of epic proportions. From this perspective, Robertson looked relatively favourably on the vogue for archaic poetic forms imported mostly from France which, as John Gross wrote, 'kept the air humming in the 1870s and 1880s with ballades and triolets and villanelles.'[170] Austin Dobson and W.E. Henley were the best–known of to the so–called 'Rondeliers', one of whom was Andrew Lang, who typically produced collections with titles like

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[166] *Ibid.*, p. 533.

[167] As we will see, Robertson is referring to the eighteenth century.

[168] 'The Music of the Future', p. 283.

[169] 'The Art of Keats', in *NETCM*, p. 251.

[170] John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (London, 1969), pp. 132–3. For the English taste for French fixed forms in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, see also James K. Robinson, 'A Neglected Phase of the Aesthetic Movement: English Parnassianism', *PMLA*, 68 (1953), pp. 733–54.

Ballads and Lyrics of Old France, Ballads in Blue China, Rhymes à la Mode. In a review of Henley's *Book of Verses*, Robertson took note of this 'unprecedented phase of literary fashion' and addressed the contemporary criticism that

> the new tendencies were the beginning of the end of English verse properly so called; that our poetry was becoming played out – or that our poets were; and that this harking back to old and artificial French forms meant the advent of a new era of mechanical and constrained art, a sort of later Popeism, of which the musical sense was a trifle more sophisticated, but the intellectual grasp and moral ambition even narrower and slighter than those of the eighteenth century.[171]

Robertson agreed that 'there is clearly no abiding–place for poetic energy at all in the pagoda of the archaic–artificial' but he nonetheless saw a particular positive significance in this 'outburst of artificialism':

> On the face of the matter it is an aspiration towards form, towards measure and completeness, towards concision, even if the seduction of experiment often lead to the mere dilution of one grain of motive with the required glassful of words. There is implied in such experiment a recoil from indeterminate and rambling utterance . . .[172]

Even if the 'Rondeliers' had not produced much memorable poetry with their restrictive adherence to archaic verse–forms, they at least represented an important upward stage in the evolution of poetry, which, he felt, was heading towards a new level of perfection, combining 'the freest verse–form' with 'the maximum of concision'.[173] There we have in a nutshell Robertson's vision of the poetry of the future: a poetry not bound by outdated rules, but aspiring through the creative mastery of formal elements to create an immediate concentrated effect on the emotions. This ideal, no epic could finally approach.

With Robertson's persistent emphasis on the formal aspects of poetry and his anti–Arnoldian denial of the poet's and critic's right to link poetry with morality, there appear to be excellent grounds for concluding that Robertson was substantially influenced by or even part of the movement that is broadly described as 'aestheticism'. In his book on the subject, R.V. Johnson outlines a number of characteristics of aestheticism which seem perfectly compatible with

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[171] 'Mr. W.E. Henley', in *Criticisms*, I, p. 36.
[172] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[173] *Ibid.*

Robertson's views of poetry.[174] First of all, Johnson describes the movement as 'a drastic attempt to separate art from life', thus promoting art for art's sake. One way of interpreting art for art's sake, Johnson explains further, 'is to say that the nineteenth–century aesthete discarded instruction, as a justification of art, and settled for delight alone', which is a fair description of Robertson's critical principles with regard to poetry as described so far. Moreover, Johnson continues, 'Aestheticism commonly attaches a high value to 'form' in art, the value of a work of art being dependent on form rather than on subject–matter', a view which assumes that 'there are certain formal properties – in poetry, such things as rhyme–patterns, rhythmic effects, what is now called 'verbal texture', diction, imagery – that can be appreciated entirely for themselves, independently of the thought for which they are the vehicle.' Again, Robertson would have found little to quarrel with such a characterization of his approach to poetry. Finally, Johnson stresses the aesthete's tendency to set up the 'purer' arts such as painting, sculpture, and in particular music as examples for literature to emulate, which reminds us of Robertson's pronouncements on music and poetry. When we substitute 'poetry' for 'art' in Walter Pater's famous saying that 'all art aspires to the condition of music', we end up with an apt summing–up of Robertson's critical position.

When we pursue the question of Robertson's connection with the aesthetic movement further, we find a strong resemblance between Robertson's views on poetry and the critical work of Edgar Allen Poe, 'one of the major aesthetic heroes of the later nineteenth century'.[175] In his seminal essay on 'The Poetic Principle'[176] Poe establishes a number of poetic laws with which Robertson found himself fully in accord. First of all, he attacks the long poem, arguing that the very phrase 'long poem' is a contradiction in terms and that such a work as *Paradise Lost* is only to be considered poetical when 'we view it merely as a series of minor poems.' It is, in fact, only in the short lyric poem that the true poetic effect may be achieved. Secondly, Poe takes up arms against what he calls 'the heresy of *The Didactic*', the idea that 'every poem . . . should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged.' To Poe, there is no poem more 'supremely noble' than the 'poem which is a poem and nothing more', the 'poem written solely for the poem's sake'. Not the moral message, but 'Music, in its various modes of metre, rhythm, and rhyme' is the essential component of great poetry, and its

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[174] R.V. Johnson, *Aestheticism* (London, 1969), pp. 13–19.

[175] *Strangeness and Beauty. An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism 1840–1910*, eds Eric Warner and Graham Hough, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1983), I, p. 145.

[176] The essay first appeared in *Sartain's Union Magazine*, in October 1848. The quotations here are taken from the abbreviated reprint which appears in *Strangeness and Beauty*, I, pp. 148–53.

development is to be ensured by the 'union of Poetry with Music'. All this finally leads up to Poe's well–known definition of poetry as 'the rhythmical creation of beauty', which Robertson endorsed beyond question. Robertson was well acquainted with Poe's work, and the essay on Poe which appears in *NETCM* is an eloquent defence of the man and his writings, in which he shows himself particularly charmed by those lyrics in which Poe put his poetic theories into practice, such as *To Helen* ('one of the most ripely perfect and spiritually charming poems ever written' [p. 81]) and *For Annie* ('I know little in the way of easeful word music that will compare with this' [p. 91]). Moreover, Robertson hailed Poe as 'a keen and scientific literary critic' [p. 75], so that it becomes plausible to conclude that Poe as an aesthetic critic may well have exerted considerable influence on Robertson's views of poetry.

It appears, all in all, that there are quite sufficient grounds for regarding Robertson as a fully paid–up member of the aesthetic movement, if we shall for the moment assume that all these different strands of thought and ideas concerning art ever constituted what might strictly be called a 'movement'. However, it is possible to make a significant case *against* this point of view as well. For one thing, although Robertson expresses views which are suggestive of involvement in aestheticism, he never discusses any of the main representatives of the movement, such as Pater, Swinburne, or Wilde. Their names may appear in Robertson's writings, but only sporadically and never in connection with any discussion regarding aesthetic principles of art or art for art's sake. While he entered the debate on realism in fiction in his usual polemical spirit, the debate on aestheticism seems to have passed him by completely. If it were not for his interest in Poe, it would almost seem as if his views were formed in a kind of intellectual vacuum, hardly the atmosphere in which a controversialist like Robertson usually prospered. There are simply no indications that Robertson's ostensibly aesthetically–inspired ideas were formed through reading, say, Pater or Swinburne. Moreover, we should bear in mind that Robertson's advocacy of art for art's sake is limited to poetry alone, and is never afforded wider application. We are finally left with the puzzling question how this rationalist and moralist, hardly the kind of aesthetic figure ridiculed by Gilbert and Sullivan in *Patience*, came by this aestheticism in poetry, and in poetry alone.

It is, I would suggest, precisely in Robertson's rationalism that the key to the answer may be found. In the *Autobiography* of one of the greatest nineteenth–century rationalists (and a man much admired by Robertson), John Stuart Mill, we can read how the author was saved from emotional starvation by the soothing ministry of Wordsworth's poetry. It appears from such a statement as the following that poetry may well have performed a similar function for Robertson.

> Its [poetry's] great vindication is that for all of us it may be a life–long ministry of refined enjoyment, an inward music that can transfigure jarring circumstance and lighten sombre hours as nothing else can; a music that the poor man can command when he has no access to the other joy of actual sound.[177]

The music of poetry offered Robertson a means of escape from a life spent at the centre of an intricate web of rationalist polemics and controversy, and his radical separation of form and substance appears to have been to no small degree an attempt to defend this poetic haven of rest against outside intrusion. By concentrating on the formal aspects of a poem which in terms of content should have roused him to furious indignation, Robertson created for himself a quiet little corner where he would not be disturbed by the ideological bickering of the outside world. In other words, Robertson's aesthetic formalism appears to be expressive of a profoundly personal psychological need, rather than of a rationally chosen position in a literary debate. Rationalism furnished Robertson with most of what he needed in life, but it could not furnish everything.

Thus the separation of form and substance allowed Robertson to take great pleasure in reading, for instance, Tennyson, a poet for whose philosophy of life he could muster but little sympathy. It is remarkable that in this formalist approach to poetry, Robertson found himself in the company of George Saintsbury, though on a different side of the ideological spectrum. Like Robertson, Saintsbury advocated a form of art for art's sake in his preoccupation with the formal aspects of poetry. In 1926 he described himself as a 'critic who for more than half a century has done his little best to accentuate the importance of treatment over subject'[178] and his histories of English prose rhythm and English prosody alone bear powerful witness to that view. Gross has called Saintsbury 'an aesthete on paper' to whom 'there was nothing incongruous about a solid conservative making his critical debut with an encomium of Baudelaire: you simply praised the poet as a superlative verbal craftsman, and dismissed his obsession with evil as a pose.'[179] As we will see in the following pages, a similar tactics was constantly adopted by Robertson, when dealing with poets whose views clashed with his own. The haven of rest was, after all, not to be disturbed.

The only problem is that the fundamental question whether Robertson was actually able to keep the intruders from the world of morality and ideology at bay has to be answered with an emphatic 'no'. It turns out that in practice the

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[177] *What to Read*, p. 8.

[178] 'Technique', *Dial* (N.Y.), 80 (1926), p. 273. Quoted from Dorothy Richardson, 'Saintsbury and Art for Art's Sake in England', *PMLA*, 59 (1944), p. 258.

[179] Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, p. 146.

clear theoretical separation Robertson envisaged between form and substance cannot be consistently maintained, at least not by him. Again and again in his criticism of poetry, Robertson strays into discussions of moral issues which he asserts should not be there in the poetry in the first place, but which he cannot avoid exploring now that they are staring him in the face. He simply cannot cease being the moralist he so ostensibly is in his manifold other fields of interest, so that, to give but one example, we find him dedicating an entire volume to the teachings of Browning and Tennyson. This, then, is the great paradox which runs through all of Robertson's criticism of poetry: in his very attempt to do away with morals in poetry, he cannot help but moralize. It is also, I believe, what rescues his criticism from being solidly one-dimensional. Had he consistently concentrated on the formal aspects of poetry alone, his criticism would only have had a very limited interest. Now, however, we find reflected in it a much wider range of ideas, thus making a far more persuasive demand on our attention.

Having arrived at this conclusion, it is now time to turn to Robertson's concrete judgments of a representative selection of poets in order to examine in more detail in how far Robertson's theory guides his practice, and in how far that practice itself yields results which may continue to interest us.

Robertson on Spenser

Robertson's criticism of Spenser is to be found in his book on *Elizabethan Literature*, in which the poet of *The Faerie Queene* shares the main focus of attention with Shakespeare.[180] Robertson regarded Spenser as the poet who had ensured that 'English rhymed verse was now once for all placed upon its modern basis of regular metres and rhythms.' [15] Before Spenser, important innovative work had been done by Wyatt and Surrey, to whom it was left 'to effect a new departure by a free assimilation of both Italian and French poetry, in which both themes and measures broke fresh ground.' [44] Of the two, Wyatt was the lesser influence, since – an important criterion in Robertson's book – 'in many cases no metrical rules will avail to make Wyatt's verse scan.' [45] Surrey, on the other hand, is credited by Robertson with the 'memorable achievement of creating English blank verse, the one fortunate imitation of classical methods of which the language was capable', and, moreover, with displaying 'an inwardness of feeling as well as subtlety of music' [51] in some of his love poetry that made him speculate regretfully about what Surrey might

[180] Page numbers referring to *Elizabethan Literature* are given in square brackets in the main text.

have achieved had he lived longer. It was, however, left to Spenser to truly take English poetry into a new age.

In his discussion of Spenser, Robertson emphasizes from the start that it is essential to separate Spenser the teacher from Spenser the poet:

> Spenser, for his age a teacher, is for us first and last a maker of the music of words, a creator of rhythmical and phraseological beauty; and it is in virtue of that faculty that he has retained through three poetic eras the status of "the poets' poet." [67]

Turning first to Spenser as a craftsman in form, Robertson takes the date of the publication of the *Shepherd's Calender* (1579) as representing a new departure in poetic achievement:

> The *Calender* might be compared with the concert performance of a modern virtuoso in music: it reveals at once the highest reach of executive faculty in the widest range of artistic forms that Englishmen had yet seen in their own language. Only a born and trained master of verse could have achieved such vigour with such melody of utterance; such ease in a dozen styles; such expert facility in transfigured folk–song along with such evident scholarly accomplishment. [70–71]

Of Spenser's later work, Robertson singles out the *Epithalamion* and *Prothalamion* as incomparable among earlier and contemporary work for 'sheer variety of melody and wealth of charm', while with the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser showed his power 'to produce without limit continuous and canorous verse, as perfectly ordered in its own fashion as that of any other language'. [72] Moreover, Robertson felt that with the creation of the Spenserian stanza, 'a new felicity' had been achieved, 'the long closing line having an incalculable melodic value'. [73] All in all, Robertson could not but conclude that, in view of Spenser's formal virtuosity, he was to be regarded as 'the first great master in modern English poetry'. [72]

Had Robertson's analysis of Spenser stopped at this point, the conclusion might be warranted that Robertson did but intend to write a very one–sided eulogy of the Elizabethan's work. However, after much praise along such lines as demonstrated in the above quotes, Robertson proceeds to approach Spenser from a different angle with the observation that 'It is too true that all this new wealth of beauty is in part countervailed by artistic blemishes of the most grievous kind.' [73] Curiously enough, these 'artistic blemishes' actually turn out to be of a moral kind when Robertson once more turns to the *Faerie Queene*:

> In the *Faerie Queene*, the master of the lovely line and the exquisite phrase outgoes the popular dramatists in his resort to images of nastiness; and with all his moralizing his imagination is often gratuitously gross. . . . The mere nauseousness of much of his imagery must set a sensitive modern reader chronically thinking of disinfectants. [74–75]

Such gross moral insensitivity reminds us, Robertson argues, that 'we are dealing with a poet, and a poet of the English Renaissance at that; not with a thinker.' [75] As a result, Spenser's masterpiece, as Robertson sees it, is in the end a 'long poem without unity, an eked–out string of similar episodes without vital connexion, a procession of personages distinguishable only as good and bad, fair and foul, brave and craven.' [76] Spenser's ultimate failure is that, not possessing the qualities of a true thinker or even a sufficient amount of moral refinement, he was none the less led by 'the aesthetic fallacy of that age to hold by the didactic view of all art' [76] to adopt the role of teacher. Not only was he ill–fitted for that task, but it also affected him in the formal application of his aesthetic talents. Since with Spenser, 'the didactic view of poetry served as an anaesthetic to the artistic sense' [79], the *Faerie Queene*

> often suggests a dredging machine which with equal facility pours forth gold, diamonds, and mud, as being bound to keep going, whatever be the material forthcoming. No other great poet has produced so many lines of doggerel, so much unashamed line–padding. All that must be accepted as a by–product of the gold and the gems. [77–78]

By his regarding 'the main aim of a poem as moral instruction' and 'beauty of workmanship as an embellishment rather than as essential' [79], Spenser's work becomes for Robertson a telling example of the damage that can be done to potentially beautiful poetry by imposing elements of moral didacticism upon it.

In spite of such criticism as outlined above, Robertson nonetheless seemed convinced of Spenser's greatness. He showed himself, however, considerably less charmed by the generation of poets which came to the fore in the final decades of the sixteenth century, notably the droves of sonneteers who catered for the literary fashion of the age:

> Never had there been such an outburst of lyricism in England; and, despite the facility of much of the output, never, perhaps, was there in proportion so little of satisfying result to garner for posterity. The poets at first sight seem a very nest of singing birds, singing because they must, on the ancient, the primal impulse. A

> perusal soon arouses a cold suspicion, fully confirmed by exact modern research, that the nest of singing birds is a cage of parrots. [144]

The notable exception in this situation of creative dearth was Shakespeare, whose 'abnormal perceptivity and responsiveness' as evinced in his dramatic work, combined with his 'unique facility of rhythmic utterance' made the sonnet for him 'an instrument as apt as to others it was recalcitrant.' [147] On the whole, however, poetry appeared to Robertson slow to follow Spenser's lead, and it even took a direction in the poets we now know as the Metaphysicals which he regarded with frank aversion. Some credit was perhaps due to Donne as one who 'deliberately departed from merely regular metres, anticipating the larger rhythm of stresses which . . . was to be established in the nineteenth century by Coleridge, and more effectually by Tennyson', but Robertson could command only little respect for a poet who 'so frequently and so wilfully turned verse, as did Donne, to purposes remote from beauty.'[181] Another Metaphysical, Andrew Marvell, was granted by Robertson to have produced some 'clear music', which, however, was

> jarred by those glassy and chilling conceits which seem to represent an inevitable disease in the poetry of the time, turning the excesses and extravagances of the older verse into something inorganic and repulsive, like (to fall into the very vein) the chalkstones which the gout of eld produces after a middle–age of wine.[182]

It was not until the arrival of Milton, 'sealed of the true tribe of song', that a man of genius once more took charge of the innovation of English poetry. In Robertson's view, Milton achieved a 'combination of meaning and melody' in his blank verse which the Elizabethan poets, even Spenser, had rarely achieved.[183] Unfortunately, apart from a number of equally laudatory passing references, we have no other evidence of Robertson's admiration of Milton, let alone a full–scale essay.

Similarly, we lack any extensive treatment by Robertson of the poetry of the eighteenth century, but in this case the reasons for his silence are rather more obvious. Here, Robertson appears to have been in full accord with Matthew Arnold, who dismissed the poetry of the eighteenth century as the product of an 'age of prose and reason'. It is evident that Robertson found little to interest

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[181] 'Form in Poetry', p. 382.
[182] 'Marvell', in *Criticisms*, I, p. 16.
[183] 'Form in Poetry', p. 382.

himself as far as formal poetic innovation was concerned in an age of poetry dominated by 'the simple pentameter couplet',[184] of poetry that 'rarely goes into its subjects deeply.'[185] He was willing to concede that 'the standards of pregnancy and diction set up by Pope doubtless kept eighteenth–century verse at a level of sheer craftsmanship as high as the average of either the previous or the following age',[186] but good craftsmanship alone did not make great poetry. Whatever Pope's abilities may have been, the fact that he was 'so unfortunate in his artistic ideal', which was the ideal of the age, prevented him from achieving greatness. On the whole the eighteenth century constitutes to Robertson a period in literary history which, as far as its poetry is concerned, is best relegated to oblivion.

Robertson on Wordsworth and Coleridge

Considering Robertson's distaste of the restrictions imposed on poetic expression by the iron uniformity of the eighteenth–century rules of poetic diction, it is not surprising that he should turn to the age of Romantic poetry with considerably more enthusiasm. At last the circumstances had arisen in which the 'preference for freer rhythm and feeling',[187] which Robertson shared, was no longer a measure of eccentricity. What *is* perhaps surprising is the fact that Robertson could muster relatively little enthusiasm for the work of one of the main protagonists of the movement, William Wordsworth, and that he should choose, of all places, the preface to his own anthology *Winnowings from Wordsworth* of 1883 as the battlefield for his critical assault on the Lake Poet.[188] For an assault it truly is, and once again formal criteria are at the heart of Robertson's criticism.

As his starting–point, Robertson, always the controversialist, takes issue with Matthew Arnold's selection of Wordsworth's poems in the volume he published in 1879, and to which the famous essay on Wordsworth which later appeared in *Essays in Criticism. Second Series* formed the preface, In Robertson's opinion, 'the editor who gives us "Simon Lee", "Margaret", "Michael", fifty of the Sonnets, "The Pet Lamb", and a score of pieces of no greater value, and all with the assurance that trained taste will not be offended' was one who had to be guarded against. To prove his point, he quotes one stanza from *Simon Lee* as typical of Wordsworth's worst and adds the following comments:

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[184] *Ibid.*, p. 383.
[185] *Winnowings from Wordsworth*, p. xiv.
[186] 'Form in Poetry', p. 383.
[187] *Ibid.*, p. 384.
[188] References referring to this preface are given in square brackets in the main text.

> These amazing lapses of triviality and doggerel – if we may speak of one stanza in "Simon Lee" as constituting a lapse – meet one in almost every second page of Wordsworth, and can only be set down to the injurious influence of his solitary life. It is inevitable that a Boetian [*sic*] quality should enter into the work of a man who regards nature as the most potent instrument of culture, is constantly turning out verse, and submits it to no harder test than the edgeless criticism of an admiring domestic circle. [ix]

Wordsworth, in other words, was far too uncritical of his own work, nor did his environment do much good in correcting his poetic 'lapses'. As a result, Robertson contends, he frequently forgot the essential law that 'it is, in the long run, strong feeling that finds the best words' and that 'the poet who versifies on everything is sure to be frequently feeble, simply because strong feeling is but an occasional visitant.' [xiv] A selection of Wordsworth's really valuable work is therefore likely to be relatively short, in any case much shorter than Arnold found necessary in his anthology.

Robertson argues that Arnold's more copious choice may have been the result of the fact that 'the selector has been influenced by his appreciation of the moral of the poem, despite his distrust of a similar tendency in the "Wordsworthians", the adherents and admirers of Wordsworth's philosophical position.'[189] [10] Once again, Robertson points out that 'poetry is in the last analysis perfection of style', and refers to Coleridge to clarify his position:

> Coleridge's favourite definition, "The most proper words in their proper places", or, as it was expressed before him, "The best words in the best order", embraces all that is of value in Wordsworth's prefatory vindications of his poetic method, and indicates the final critical test. Our constitutional love of measure, rhythm, and rhyme determines that verse is the "best order" for him who can lay hold of the best words . . . [xi]

Small wonder, then, that Robertson's own aversion to the 'Wordsworthians' should be even greater than Arnold's. Not only did their following of Wordsworth's teaching violate to him 'the true poetic creed', but he also regarded that teaching itself as 'often extremely questionable', a point on which he does not find it necessary to elaborate.

The selection of poems (thirty–seven in all) which Robertson finally presents is a testimony to his preference for short lyric poetry. He has given no

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[189] In his essay on Wordsworth in *Essays in Criticism. Second Series*, Arnold criticizes the 'Wordsworthians' as apt to talk as if 'everything is precious which Wordsworth . . . may give us.'

place to any of Wordsworth's longer work in blank verse; rather, we find lyrics like *To a Butterfly*, *To the Cuckoo*, *To the Daisy*, and *To a Skylark* particularly well represented. It is on these that he must have based his final conclusion – presented as somewhat of an afterthought – that Wordsworth 'has given us poetry which, by its exquisiteness of style and depth of clarified emotion, charms us as we are seldom charmed by other verse of his own or previous generations.' [xxvi] In spite of such a conciliatory statement, it is clear that Robertson found Wordsworth's poetry of only very limited interest.

If we now turn from Robertson's criticism of Wordsworth to that of Coleridge, we find that, again, only a very limited portion of Coleridge's output can satisfy him. In the essay on Coleridge that was first published in the *Free Review* and later reprinted in *NETCM*,[190] Robertson poses the central question

> how Coleridge could go on composing *Religious Musings* and other *Sibylline Leaves* up till his twenty–fourth year, attaining at most a rhetorical impressiveness and an odic emphasis, and should then suddenly irradiate in the musical splendours of *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and the ethereal harpings of the first part of *Christabel*. These three masterpieces were begun or done in 1797, his twenty–fifth year. Just after that again there are some successes, such as *Love* (1798–99) and *The Ballad of the Dark Ladie* (1798); but thenceforth, with very few exceptions, we have the merely respectable performances of the earlier academic manner; and to the last Coleridge figures for us as a poet with some magical moments, never quite regained. [137]

The answer to the above question, Robertson proposes to find in the physical circumstances of Coleridge's existence, by setting up, in scientific fashion, 'a simple study of his organism, in itself and in relation to its environment.' [132] Robertson singles out Coleridge's 'abnormal facility of discourse' and 'equally abnormal fluidity of mind' [134] as his leading intellectual traits, which were not, however, conducive to the development of his sense of poetical beauty. Rather, 'the general lack of any such sense in his pastors and masters' [136] led him to become, in most of his work, 'only an imitative performer of unstable judgment, at times sinking to an artistic abjection on a par with his temperamental collapse.' [141] As primarily 'a combination of great faculties with a feeble personality' [142–3], Coleridge required the stimulus of opium to produce his best work. In fact, Robertson argued that 'what men regard as his mere bane, the drug to which he resorted as a relief from suffering, and which

[190] Page numbers referring to this essay in *NETCM* are given in square brackets in the main text.

De Quincey declared to have "killed Coleridge as a poet," is rather, by reason of its first magical effect, the special source of his literary immortality.' [140] Thus, Coleridge's masterpieces become the outcome of an unusual combination of internal and external circumstances, rather than the products of a creative mind in relative control of its material.

What attracts Robertson in Coleridge's masterpieces, is, interestingly enough, not merely their stylistic proficiency, although this continues to be an important element. Robertson, sternest of rationalists and vigorous advocate of realism in fiction, displays a rather unexpected fascination with the dream–like, other–worldly quality of Coleridge's best verse:

> The *Ancient Mariner* is a triumph of sheer poetic style; or more strictly, a triumphant application of a rare method to a strange theme; and its mere technique and treatment keep it perpetually fascinating. In the handling of a moral fantasy we have enshrined for us a harmony and variety of colours, a wealth of rightly felt and phrased impressions of the real inner and outer world, such as no other poetic work can surpass. [187–8]

> Coleridge's poem [*Kubla Khan*] is the visualising of an opium–dream, a rarity of sensation at least as well worth literary immortality as any other experience whatever; and the feat is accomplished with a magic of sound and thought wholly incomparable. The radiant vision hangs in his words transparent and complete as a rainbow, and permanent as marble. [189]

Here, carried along by genuine enthusiasm, Robertson shows himself capable of looking beyond the technical aspects of the poem he examines and immersing himself completely and willingly in the dream world created by Coleridge. Unusually for him, he is no longer the detached, analytical observer but becomes almost an active participant in the aesthetic experience rendered by the poet. This, in Robertsonian terms, is probably the highest praise a poet can be afforded, and it is remarkable indeed to see it bestowed upon a poet in whom Robertson otherwise found so little to praise, certainly as far as politics or philosophy were concerned.

Robertson on Shelley

It seems likely that, to a considerable extent, Robertson's praise of Coleridge's masterpieces has to do with the fact that they appeared to him particulary remote from abstract thinking on general or topical intellectual or moral issues. That this is not something that can with justice be said of Shelley's poetry is a fact not lost upon Robertson, who felt that Shelley's attempts to incorporate the

world of abstract intellectual ideas into imaginative poetry were doomed to failure. In his essay on 'Shelley and Poetry' in *NETCM*,[191] he unfavourably compared Shelley with Keats in this respect:

> Keats's foot is firm on the earth, however far his fancy may fly: he half turns old dreams into life, with his ardent sense of earthly beauty: his pulse throbs through all his singing: it is the poesy of warm-blooded youth, dreaming itself alive in the world's spring-time. With Shelley, the case is almost precisely the reverse. Brooding on the present, and inspired by an intellectual idea, he turns life into a dream, spiritualising his youth and maiden into phantoms who move in a world of abstractions and visions, "where the wild bee never flew." [194]

The vital quality that Robertson does discern in Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on Melancholy*,[192] but finds fatally lacking in Shelley's poetry is 'the element of flesh and blood' [194], the concrete hold on reality which ensures that even the most fanciful flight of the imagination has its roots in solid earth. As a result of this deficiency, the figures in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, for instance,

> are of a shadowy consistency, abstractions mingling with spirits, and all uttering unearthly speech. The vital idea of the poem is embroidered with fantasy till it hardly counts with us: if we read on it is because we care more for fantasy than for human significance in song. [195]

In contrast, the figures and pictures in Keats's *Hyperion* have 'much the larger measure of definiteness', precisely because they lack those 'qualities of etherealness and devotion to ideas' [195] which, Robertson observed regretfully, were partly the cause of attracting so many readers to Shelley.

Furthermore, Robertson also found Shelley grossly deficient in what he so clearly considered a fundamental element in poetic creation: careful attention to form. Throughout his essay on Shelley, Robertson restates again and again his

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[191] References to this essay are given in square brackets in the main text.

[192] 'The Art of Keats', in *NETCM*, pp. 243–7. Robertson's verdict on Keats's odes, which he considered his greatest work, is that *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on Melancholy* should be ranked above *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and 'the second-rate' *Ode to Autumn*. [p. 247] Overall, Robertson concluded his essay on Keats (which is considerably less substantial than that on Shelley) on the positive note that 'there remains ample ground for saying that Keats was a great poet, prematurely cut off', thereby agreeing largely with Arnold in his essay on Keats.

conviction that poems should first of all provide 'the combined pleasures of perfectly choice expression and exquisite cadence, and, in the case of their being rhymed, harmony of sound' [197], and he felt strongly that, especially in his longer poems, Shelley only rarely lived up to this standard. With regard to *The Revolt of the Islam*, the main butt of his criticism in this essay, Robertson could not but conclude that

> seeing he [Shelley] is so far content to find his account in the primitive love of rhyme for rhyme's sake as to pad out his longest poem with innumerable far–fetched chimes and spurious echoes, and seeing he is thus diffuse throughout even in excess of his natural tendency to diffuseness, the work is technically bad. [200]

Although Shelley may at times have achieved a certain 'sonorous and impressive rhetorical quality', *The Revolt of the Islam* is on the whole to be written off as one of the worst samples of inattention to technical care in Shelley's already uneven poetic output.

Interestingly, Robertson does not limit himself to aesthetic criticism of Shelley's technical proficiency, but also proposes to address 'the quality of Shelley's thought'. Here, in the face of a poet whose work he cannot but consider the outcome of 'vaporous thinking' [203], we suddenly find the rationalist and moralist in Robertson reasserting himself. After all, he asks himself, 'how shall a mere set of recurrent cadences support to infinity a train of incoherent and intangible ideas?' [201–2] Art for art's sake may all be very well, but poetry does not in the end deserve to be treated with silk gloves merely on account of its formal properties:

> We must come to a poem as to any other form of human utterance, demanding worthy reward. It is simply foolish to spend our reading hours in absorbing rhythms and rhymes, unless we are all the while obtaining the intellectual food and nerve stimulus of finely worded thought or delightful fancy. . . . What are rhyme and rhythm without these attributes? To prize them for their own sake is playing with toys; the occupation is little more respectable on the part of adults than the systematic collection of postage stamps. [202]

Unfortunately, Robertson does not actually look very closely at Shelley's world of ideas. He especially takes issue with the fact that in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley professed to dislike didactic poetry, while producing in *The Revolt of the Islam* a poem which, for Robertson, represented the very epitome of blatant didacticism. Inconsistency in reasoning is to

Robertson always the worst possible intellectual vice, and in Shelley he finds it to a degree which greatly exasperates him.

Inconsistency, however, is also what Robertson himself may well be charged with when he addresses the criticism of Matthew Arnold, who, in his essay on Byron in *Essays in Criticism. Second Series*, deplored 'the incurable want, in general, of a sound subject matter' in Shelley's poetry. To Robertson, the fact, for instance, that Shelley frequently made politics the topic of his verse does not in itself reflect negatively on his poetic powers, since there is no theme 'which cannot be treated at once melodiously and with penetrating expression.' [205] He does not hesitate to partially contradict his earlier statement on the intellectual content of poetry in a re–affirmation of his aesthetic creed:

> We do not go to poetry for arguments and facts: to do so would be to imitate the legendary personage who asked what was proved by *Paradise Lost*. We certainly ask that the poet's thoughts shall *cohere* – that they shall be the results of his careful thinking; or that when he resorts to myth and fantasy he shall use his utmost skill to make these melodious and exquisite; but it no more spoils his poetry for us to know that his serious thought is after all mistaken than to know that the myth is myth. [209]

While first asserting the importance of judging poetry on its intellectual merits, Robertson now once again professes to relegate these to a place of relative insignificance, by springing to the defence of a complete separation of form and content. Shelley, first accused of 'vaporous thinking', is now released from any intellectual responsibility. In this wavering between two different positions we may read familiar signs that Robertson's apparent advocacy of art for art's sake was based on unstable foundations, and that, in the end, the rationalist and moralist in Robertson will assert themselves.

In Robertson's actual judgments of Shelley's poems, both the intellectual and aesthetic viewpoint may be seen to play an important role. Shelley's long poems found little favour with Robertson, who judged both their 'controlling intellectual function' [216] and their technical command weak. *The Revolt of the Islam* is thus dismissed on both counts:

> Bad rhyme, bad grammar, *banal* phrase, preposterous figure, fustian rhetoric, confused logic, meaningless collocations of words, extravagant comparisons, ideas thin–spun to puerility – all these are there in the most fatal abundance, unredeemed by countervailing beauties or by subtle or striking thought. [219]

Prometheus Unbound, while yielding 'some exceedingly melodious lyrics', is chastised for wrapping the subject in a kind of 'luminous fog', instead of

'condensing the emotions set in action by theme'. [224] As a result, Shelley's poem tends to go both everywhere and nowhere. As expected, Robertson displayed more sympathy with Shelley's shorter, lyrical work, 'in which we find a marked degree of those qualities of finish, beauty, and condensation for which we have thus far [in the longer work] looked in vain', although here too there was 'still much necessity for discrimination'. *The Cloud* was felt by Robertson to be 'a marvel of technique and of beauty', 'a masterpiece of controlled fancy and delicate yet reposeful art, presenting a combination of beautiful phrase, wealth of imagery, and music, such as had not appeared before in the language.' [220] Robertson also quotes the two short and relatively unknown pieces *Dirge* and *To the Moon* as examples of what Shelley could achieve at his best.

His verdict on *The Skylark* is, however, far less positive, emphasizing that 'it is ruinously defective in point of technique.' The following is a fair sample of Robertson's analytical approach to this and other poems:

> Let the reader go over the poem line by line, and see for himself. The second line, "Bird thou never wert," is an entirely infelicitous extension of the "blithe spirit;" the "from heaven *or near it*" is 'prentice–work in ideas as in rhyme; and the fifth line will not scan. In the second stanza we have: "Higher . . . and higher from the earth thou *springest*," and "Like a *cloud* of *fire* the deep blue thou *wingest*." What, next, is to be said of the lines: "Thou dost *float* and *run* – like an *unbodied* [embodied?] *joy* whose *race* is *just* begun?" How reconcile such terms? [221]

The passage continues in this vein for at least a page more, so that in the end, little of Shelley's poem is left standing. It should be observed that here, as elsewhere, Robertson's method of analysis does frequently not so much rely on demonstrating in a reasoned manner exactly what is wrong with Shelley's technique, but rather on simply indicating numerous blemishes and assuming that they are so self–evident that the reader will see at once why Robertson objects to them. Often, however, the reader may find himself wondering why precisely Robertson finds fault with a particular, angrily italicized phrase or passage. As in his Shakespeare scholarship, Robertson tends to rely heavily on his 'ear' for metre, rhythm, and rhyme.

Robertson finally singles out one 'remarkable faculty' as underlying Shelley's worst as well as his best work, namely

> the freedom in the use of words, in which, judgment apart, he excels all previous English poets save Shakspere. It is no doubt this extraordinary capacity for mere verbal movement which overpowers most Shelleyites; it seems so wonderful, so

> superhuman, so independent of the ordinary trammels of thought and speech, that men in their surprise cease to be critical, and simply bow down and worship. [228]

Robertson saw Shelley's capacity to convey so passionately the 'impression of impressiveness' by his sheer command of vocabulary as both his greatest asset and his greatest liability. Thus, Robertson criticized *Ode to the West Wind* as 'Wild, passionate yearning, undefined aspiration, expressed with an eagerness always tending towards incoherence and unintelligibility'. [229] Leo Storm has pointed out that it is in such judgments that Robertson seems to anticipate F.R. Leavis's and T.S. Eliot's criticism of Shelley. Leavis's analysis in *Revaluation* of the vagueness of the imagery in *Ode to the West Wind* certainly chimes in perfectly with Robertson's views on Shelley's 'extraordinary capacity for mere verbal movement', while, in more general terms, there is indeed a 'striking similarity' between Robertson and Leavis 'in point of assertiveness of manner and force of style in pursuit of Shelley's flaws in thought and technique.'[193] Robertson would certainly also have found himself in full agreement with Eliot's well-known statement that

> The ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be ideas of adolescence – as there is every reason why they should be. And an enthusiasm for Shelley seems to me also to be an affair of adolescence; for most of us, Shelley has marked an intense period before maturity, but for how many does Shelley remain the companion of age?[194]

Considering the interest Eliot generally displayed in Robertson's work, it seems probable that he was well aware of the rationalist's views, as may be true of F.R. Leavis.[195] However, before claiming for Robertson the distinction of pioneering New Criticism *avant la lettre* on the basis of his essay on Shelley, as Storm does, it should be kept in mind that Robertson's criticism of Shelley generally tends to bear out Matthew Arnold's more famous verdict of the Romantic poet as a 'beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain'.[196] It seems likely that in this case, Arnold and not

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[193] Storm, 'J.M. Robertson and T.S. Eliot: A Note on the Genesis of Modern Critical Theory', p. 319.

[194] T.S. Eliot, 'Shelley and Keats', in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge MA, 1933), p. 80.

[195] According to the oral testimony of his son, L.R Leavis, F.R. Leavis was quite familiar with Robertson's literary criticism.

[196] Matthew Arnold, 'Byron', in *Essays in Criticism*, Everyman Ed. (London, 1969), p. 330.

Robertson was the dominant influence, although the latter's contribution should certainly not be entirely ruled out.

On the whole, Robertson's essay on Shelley is an ambitious undertaking, in fact, no less than an attempt to settle once and for all the poet's critical status. It ranges – albeit in a somewhat rambling manner – widely over Shelley's poetry, and, moreover, discusses in depth a number of crucial issues, such as the relation between form and content, and the suitability of certain themes as the subject–matter for poetry. In many of its concrete judgments, we recognize the view of Shelley's poetic status which came to dominate twentieth–century critical opinion through the influence of Eliot and Leavis. Even if the opinions it expresses do not appear to us to have retained their validity, it may, for the above reasons, still be considered one of Robertson's most central critical performances.

Robertson on Whitman

Robertson's criticism of Whitman, as we find it in the little volume entitled *Walt Whitman. Poet and Democrat* which appeared in 1884,[197] may serve as an illustration of the fact that when Robertson applied his criticism to a poet with whose ideas he found himself largely in sympathy, he was considerably less eager to condemn the artist for not striving after beauty in form and technique alone. In Whitman, Robertson appears to have recognized to some extent a kindred spirit, and as a consequence he displays a leniency towards the American's poetry that elsewhere we may look for in vain.

At the opening of his treatment of Whitman, Robertson notes how 'English readers had long been demanding from the United States a new and autochthonic poetical product' a demand which he attributes to 'a sense of distinction and high birthright attaching to the young nation whose gianthood was so early surmised.' [2] When the poet who seemed the embodiment of the spirit of democracy which the new nation epitomized first made himself known in England, it was not surprising that he should be welcomed with enthusiasm. In fact, Whitman received a much warmer welcome in England than in his native country, where his acceptance was slow, which leads Robertson to ask himself whether 'our attachment has not been too unadvised, too sudden.' [3] After all, what to think of a poet who deliberately sets out to provide his age with its own 'special kind of poetry'?

> Is not the very conception suggestive of the doomed prosaist who labours to turn an idea into rhyme, instead of finding, poet–wise,

[197] References to this book are given in square brackets in the main text.

> his thought run to song; – of Ben Jonson writing his tirades in prose and then blank–versifying them?

In surprising disregard of the aesthetic creed he proclaims nearly everywhere else in his 'practical' criticism and which seems to allow so little room for original thought in poetry, Robertson's answer is emphatically 'no'. He even goes so far as to state that 'nothing more decisively identifies Whitman with his age and his literature than this backbone of critical and didactic purpose in his work', [4] and shows himself resigned to the fact that, after all, 'we are brought up against the discovery that all poetry is criticism of life, and must be content with demanding that the criticism shall take a less formidably crude shape than an Essay on Man.' [5] Thus Whitman, 'the very democrat of practice as well as of faith and philosophy' escapes being rapped on the knuckles by Robertson for proclaiming his democratic ideas in verse.

Robertson's own validation for this unexpected leniency towards the expression of philosophical ideas in poetry is that Whitman is more or less a force of nature, who, in this respect, cannot be stopped in his tracks:

> His whole nature tends to rapturous expression: in very truth he cannot choose but express himself as he does. From his first line he is not only the vowed singer of democracy and the dear love of comrades, but the self–poised, self–centred, self–possessed democratic unit; a manifestation of the force which *is* democracy; the typical self–asserting individual. [6]

On this ground, Robertson can even forgive Whitman his tendency to be 'self–esteeming, vigorously egotistic, and exclusive by fits', and the 'naïf popular theism of the day which finds the universe made for man, and the land for the race.' [7] He actually goes so far as to proclaim Whitman 'the most expert scholar of democracy':

> Let any one who has gone through his prose say whether any writer has looked more piercingly and patiently into all the aspects of the subject, fair and foul; accumulated more facts and ideals or placed any in a greater variety of lights. In this department – philosophy apart – no man can teach him anything. Optimism is the *raison d'être* of his work as a whole, and the ground tone of his personality, but he has been in the deeps, and at least felt pessimistic pangs in ebb–tide moods. Only after having seen all round his theme, only after having thought over it in all weathers and all companies, in sunlight and moonlight, in ecstasy and in all despondency, in complacent ease, and in grey and dreary hours of sorrow, could he have reached his matchless certitude of belief. [8]

Clearly, this is no longer the voice of the detached critic who so coolly dismissed Wordsworth and Coleridge as philosophical lightweights and accused Shelley of 'vaporous thinking'; here we are listening to the almost religious language of a disciple of the great American prophet of democracy. It may be that Whitman is not the most versatile and subtle of thinkers, but, Robertson argues, 'when the Zeitgeist wants to strike an important blow he makes a heavy hammer.' [12] What finally matters is 'that the singer of democracy shall be fully charged with his theme; and that an idea which feeds on optimism and confidence shall be carried with a confidence that no adversity will dash.' [13] In this respect, it is impossible to find fault with Whitman.

Robertson thought it exceedingly ironic that in spite of Whitman's 'enthusiastic accounts of the elements of greatness in American life', he should be regarded by 'the respectable, cultured, American population' as 'nothing but a coarse propounder of loose notions on sexual morality.' [21] Robertson, somewhat circumspectly, grants that in *Leaves of Grass* 'Whitman does more than talk plainly of what society objects to talk of in mixed circles.' [22] However, he wholeheartedly applauds Whitman's 'entire superiority to that mere pruriency which so strangely goes unrebuked in many writers so long as they do but avoid directness, biblical or other', [24] while asking his readers 'How many of us, in the first place, can without prudery or puritanism or false pretences say that the spirit of Whitman's condemned poems is quite alien to us?' [29] After all, the poet is only 'singing a passion which he knows to be human' [32] and should not be condemned on that account. Moreover, Robertson reminds his readers of Whitman's 'loving and patient work in the hospitals through the years of the war' [21] as evidence for the poet's unquestionable overall morality, so that in the end, a condemnation of Whitman's verse on moral grounds is likely to be a sign of hypocrisy on the part of the critic.

Robertson does, however, leave room for criticism of Whitman's poetry as far as its formal proficiency is concerned, so that here he falls back again into his familiar role of aesthetic critic. He grants Whitman that his verse has 'distinctly that quality of "lilt," which is after all the generic difference between poetry and prose', but he also observes that it often seems 'hopelessly unrhythmical' and is hardly to be termed 'a successful poetic product'. [34] Robertson argues that in his verse, Whitman returns to 'elementary methods', to 'a prior stage of development' [35]:

> The essence of modern poetry may be said to be indicated in Wordsworth's idea of emotion recollected in tranquillity and artistically expressed; while Whitman chafes at the drill, and rejects the artistic pains as belonging to the department of "polite

> kinks," grammar, and fine manners. And the upshot is that the world is impelled to view Whitman's aversion to graceful poetic form as it does his rejection of manners, and pronounce him a fine specimen of the barbarian. [35]

What Whitman appears to be lacking mainly in Robertson's eyes, is the artistic discipline to make his verse conform to the formal rules which the best literature of the past centuries has set for the genre. Instead, Whitman prefers to take one step back on the evolutionary ladder and to start again from there.

Robertson admits that there may be advantages to such a viewpoint, that 'In the very act . . . of diving back to the primitive, such a poet may supply us with the germs of a new artistic growth.' [36] These, he contends paradoxically enough, are mainly to be found in Whitman's more conventional later work, when 'It is a softer pulse that writes, a more cultured brain that muses and chooses its words.' [38] In terms of technique, Robertson has little taste for 'the remarkable features of the early "Leaves of Grass"', with its 'grotesque phraseology, the coined mongrel words, the abrupt transitions, the reckless collocations of parts of speech, the slang, the insupportable catalogues'. [40] Moreover, he frowns on Whitman's 'depreciation of rhyme, that, too, seems largely referable to an incapacity or indisposition to take pains' [44], and argues that 'if Whitman had had Tennyson's art, his sense of the comicality of rhyme would never have been developed.' [45] On the whole, Whitman's work seems to run precisely opposite to the development of contemporary poetry:

> It is becoming more and more rich in complexities, and it runs more and more to concise treatment; it does not demand great frames and canvases; it seeks subtle condensations and essences, Pisgah–sights, mood–visions, raptures, sighs, and elusive ideas. Does this mean garrulity, and sentences that run on anyhow? The very reverse. . . . Our poets will in future assuredly sing less, because all their work must be a more complex product. [48]

Thus, Robertson does not so much see Whitman as an innovator in poetic form, but rather as a kind of eccentric loner who should not count on ever gathering a large following.

In spite of such criticism, Robertson concludes that

> the poetry of Whitman, ill–smelted as so much of it is, cataloquial as is so much of his transcription from life, and lacking as his song so often is in music, somehow does not seem thus marked for doom even in respect of his didacticism. And the reason would seem to be not merely that his message is the intense expression of the deepest passion, but that the passion is the very flower of the

> life of the race thus far, and carries in it the seeds of things to come. He cannot soon be left behind – he has gone so far before. [52]

Here we see clearly that, given a message which sufficiently appeals to him, Robertson is quite willing to overlook what are to him formal deficiencies. It is curious how Robertson shows himself at the same time progressive in his whole–hearted embrace of Whitman's democratic message and denunciation of Victorian prudery, and conservative in his wish to make Whitman adhere to established formal rules of poetry. On the whole, however, the reader of Robertson's little volume on Whitman will come away from it with the impression that he has read a well–reasoned, balanced account of a poet who does not tend to instill balanced opinions in his critics, certainly not those of the end of the nineteenth century. In his book *Walt Whitman in England*, Harold Blodgett claimed 'a high place in Whitman literature' for Robertson's critique, because 'while admiring Walt, it keeps its head and gives the poet his due without surrendering incontinently . . . to rhapsody.'[198] In the age in which 'Whitmania' reached its height, this was indeed no small achievement.

Robertson on Tennyson

If Robertson's criticism of Whitman shows him admiring the American poet in spite of serious doubts about a lack of attention to poetic form and largely on the basis of his ideological viewpoints, Robertson's writings on Tennyson present us with precisely the reverse of this situation. In terms of technical and formal ability, Robertson had nothing but the highest praise for Tennyson, who, in his eyes 'has preserved the crown for poetry, so to speak, by the most unwearying, the most devoted cultivation of sheer poetic art of which literary history preserves any record'[199] and in that respect ranked above any other poet in the history of English poetry, Milton included. However, as far as his 'teachings' were concerned, Tennyson's moral and intellectual opinions as expressed in his poetry and elsewhere, Robertson had nothing but scorn for the Poet Laureate, and in the long essay on 'The Teaching of Tennyson' that makes up over half of the volume entitled *Browning and Tennyson as Teachers*, he painstakingly recorded the many ideological offences of which he considered Tennyson guilty. Overall, Robertson is extremely careful in his criticism to maintain a strict division between the aesthetic and moral–intellectual aspects of Tennyson's poetry, almost as if he is discussing two separate individuals. In

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[198] Harold Blodgett, *Walt Whitman in England* (Ithaca, 1934), p. 199.

[199] 'De Mortuis: IV. Tennyson', in *Criticisms*, II, p. 210.

fact, Robertson's estimate of Tennyson's work is essentially founded on his perception of 'the moral duality' in the poet's nature,

> a duality in virtue of which he is at once the most nearly infallible of literary judges and the most impeccable of artists, while for all purposes of abnormal moral criticism he remains to the end a schoolboy, with moments of ethical elevation, the precarious fruit of mere revulsion against other men's blatancies. [68][200]

In order to give an accurate impression of Robertson's criticism of Tennyson, it is perhaps best to follow him in this 'duality', and to discuss his views on Tennyson as a thinker and as a poetic craftsman separately, starting with the first aspect.

'The Teaching of Tennyson' opens with the somewhat regretful observation that Tennyson leaves the critic no choice but to attack him on the moral–intellectual side of his work, since 'he has again and again attacked men of another way of thinking, not only with arrogance but with fanaticism.' [7] Thus provoked, he contrasts Tennyson unfavourably with Browning, who 'seems to have been incapable of malice', whereas Tennyson could show himself 'distinctly malevolent'.[201] True to his scientific tenets, Robertson sought the causes of Tennyson's imperfectly balanced personality in his early environment and upbringing, pointing to 'the often unkind and often despairing father, and the mother who grovelled for fear in a thunderstorm' and an altogether 'abnormal stock'. [9] Robertson argued that this hardly constituted the kind of background favourable to developing intellectual depth and equilibrium, and he adduced *Two Voices* and *The Palace of Art*, 'the earliest poems in which he philosophised at any length' [12] as evidence. His conclusion as regards the first is that 'there is no escaping the fact that this simple, superficial, and inconclusive process of reflection is for him a survey of the philosophy of life – as penetrating a study as he is minded to make.' [14]

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[200] The page numbers in square brackets which appear in the main text refer to *Brwoning and Tennyson as Teachers.* The essay on 'The Teaching of Tennyson' we find there is essentially an extended reworking of the essay on 'The Art of Tennyson' in *ETCM*, which is itself reprinted from *Our Corner*, 9 (1887), pp. 87–97, 167–80. Since 'The Teaching of Tennyson' most completely embraces Robertson's views of Tennyson, it is used as the basis for the present discussion.

[201] As is apparent from the essay on 'The Teaching of Browning', Robertson was much more sympathetic to Browning as a personality than to Tennyson. However, he felt that 'the superfoetation of ideas which is his great characteristic is opposed to the very nature of verse' [p. 86], while he looked upon the theological and philosophical ideas themselves as decidedly simplistic. Moreover, Robertson judged Browning's command of poetic form to be greatly inferior to Tennyson's.

The 'inexpensive thesis' [15] of *The Palace of Art* he summarizes as 'setting forth how, after a period of that absorbing devotion to the aesthetic and mentally pleasurable side of things which is so natural to intellectual youth, he comes to realise the force of human claims and human bonds.' [14] While Robertson appreciates in both poems 'a very large proportion of artistic labor and power', they function to him in the end as 'a plain disproof of the claim that he [Tennyson] is a thinker of authority or capacity.' [15]

It is this claim which Robertson continues to attack in the course of his essay. One aspect of Tennyson's thinking which proves to Robertson the poet's limited intellectual capacity is his inconsistent attitude towards the denial of religious faith. To Robertson, this fatally undercuts, for instance, the philosophical significance of *In Memoriam*. There we find

> a simple statement, in still more admirable verse, of the alternations of hope and fear in a temperament which is not healthily related to life, and which yearningly craves for the sense of "cloudy companionship" beyond the verge of knowledge. The most majestic passages in the entire poem, or rather book, are those which confess the baselessness of the assumption of the traditional, personal, and sympathetic Deity, and of future personal human existence. Against these great strains there stand as antiphonies only the despairing cry that if that be the truth, life is a wholly desperate thing; and the simple reiteration of the old revulsion of hope. [21]

Such a poetic statement, Robertson predicts with some justice, may one day 'have a special charm and interest because of its very perturbation, its dramatic mirroring of the intellectual conflict of his time' [24], but can never lay claims to real philosophical depth. The fact that in the poem Tennyson shows himself well abreast of the scientific developments of his age may to some extent serve as a saving grace, but then Tennyson also spoke out against the rise of science in other places, so that the charge of inconsistent reasoning remains. All in all, Robertson is repelled by Tennyson's religious attitude, which is to him that of a man who 'from first to last . . . is confessedly afraid of life without the protecting presence of Something–not–Himself, and not his fellow–creatures.' [32] Such 'weakness' the stern rationalist could never condone.

Nor could he muster sympathy for the political ideology of the later Tennyson. He observed, admittedly with regret, that

> His lyric life, always ready to be swayed to didactic ends, yet unruled by any higher political wisdom than the commonplaces of domestic conservatism, is a grievous series of services to those destructive instincts with which conservatism so strangely goes

> hand in hand. Every rumor of international dispute sets him whooping: to every wind of international change he reacts as promptly as the weathercock, and as wisely as the mob, whose psychology he duplicates and whose ethic he voices. England is for him always in the right. [59]

It was with loathing that Robertson turned to a poem like *The Charge of the Heavy Brigade*, where 'the poet seems to foam at the mouth' and appears to have 'sunk . . . to a panting and convulsive rhythm that vainly stamps and leaps to get along, and to imagery of mere delirious struggle, as of maddened herds of horned beasts.' [64] Tennyson's blind nationalism and defence of 'War for War's sake' [66] added up to a spectacle, which, Robertson hoped, might be averted in others by 'the way of knowledge, of reasoned discipline, of the life of the head' [72], all of which were departments in which Tennyson had proved deficient.

Robertson was particularly troubled by Tennyson's teaching in *Maud*, by 'Its cadenced gospel of war, its harmonised heroics, its lyric shrieks against the "long, long canker of peace", its absurd national partisanship, its worse than absurd sociology'. [50] Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to praise it as 'the high–water mark of Tennyson's genius' [57], as 'the most lyrically beautiful and variously masterful volume of poetry that the century had yet seen, studded with the rarest jewels of song and wrought with a subtlety of rhythmic craftsmanship that was a new glory in English literature'. [54] Robertson regarded *Maud* as representing the very height of the evolution of poetic form. By reason of its 'sheer newness – newness of rhythm, of metres, of matter, of themes' its initial reception had understandably been difficult:

> *Maud* opens with a rhythm absolutely new in serious English verse, and the strangeness is maintained through a score of metres to the close. The strangeness of the matter is no less marked: a new intimacy of psychic presentment, . . . an explosively dramatic statement, a continuously rapid action, shock upon shock, scene upon scene – all this demands a newly nervous intensity of rhythm. The thing is a *tour de force*; and the contemporary public, brought up mainly upon Byron, and friendly to Tennyson mainly because of the less revolutionary *symmetria* alike of his best and of his most popular pieces before 1850, was taken aback. Yet for his rhythmic genius the development was inevitable: it is always genius that innovates in art, as it is genius that invents in other fields.[202]

[202] 'Form in Poetry', p. 380.

However, now that the shock of novelty had worn off, Robertson failed to see how any reader could be satisfied with the conventionality of the *Idylls of the King*, where 'the poet is writing to fill a given scaffolding, and as a result we have a constant and laboured archaism of style instead of the telling simplicity and robust modernness of his best rhymed verse'.[203] It was in *Maud* that Tennyson had afforded a glimpse of the future of English poetry, and it was much to be regretted that he had not chosen to follow his own lead.

More than any other example, Robertson's attitude towards *Maud* illustrates his almost schizophrenic approach to poetry in general, and to Tennyson in particular. In page after page of the most disparaging criticism Robertson writes off Tennyson as not in any way deserving of serious intellectual consideration, while constantly extolling his technical mastery and capacity to create poetic beauty. His criticism of Tennyson is filled with regret that the poet should have chosen to venture again and again into intellectual territory where he had no business to go, rather than to be satisfied with perfecting the gift he so clearly possessed. It is as if, by his rigorous separation of form and content in the poet's work, Robertson is constantly attempting to secure for himself the right to admire and enjoy the work of a poet who might doctrinally be called his enemy. Yet, untainted and serene enjoyment is not, I think, ever achieved by him, since he always returns to the moral, intellectual, or philosophical issues involved in the work of the poets he discusses. He simply cannot escape being what he must always remain in the very first place: a rationalist.

Conclusions

There are few conclusions left to be drawn on Robertson's criticism of poetry which have not been given in the previous pages, but one point which perhaps deserves somewhat greater emphasis is the fact that, ultimately, Robertson has no very high opinion of the overall status and function of poetry. As we have seen, he does not give poets any credit as original thinkers and actually attempts to demonstrate that poets are by nature unfit to achieve even a reasonable level of profundity in their ideas. Poetry is for him something which is to be enjoyed in the leisure hours, when the 'weary giant' who has occupied his day with the more relevant pursuits of, say, politics or sociology, can find solace in the soothing melodies of Tennyson, as long as that poet refrains from reminding him of the issues which filled his busy day–time.

Admittedly, poetry may act as a kind of stimulant to the brain, and in his short pamphlet *What to Read*, Robertson states with approval that 'So practical a thinker as Buckle has gone so far as to say that the poets are among the best

[203] 'The Art of Tennyson', p. 278.

trainers of the scientific intelligence.'[204] However, this still leaves poetry only a secondary task as a stepping–stone to greater things, which becomes apparent, for instance, when Robertson cites the example of Thomas Burt, a miner who educated himself and became a politician of note. Burt, Robertson claimed, 'could get pleasure from remembered poetry in the coal–pit, and through taking such pleasure he was the sooner qualified to leave the coal–pit and to work with his brains for his fellows in the council–chamber of his country.'[205] No clearer statement of Robertson's priorities is needed, and one is reminded of Leslie Stephen's dictum that 'There is a good deal to be said for the thesis . . . that art in general is luxurious indulgence, to which we have no right whilst crime and disease are rampant in the world.'[206]

Poetry was, however, a 'luxury' which Robertson would never deny himself and which – and this too needs to be stressed – he genuinely loved. He may not, in theoretical terms, have seen it as a truly vital human occupation, but considering the energy he devoted to it in his writing, it is obvious that it was of vital concern to him personally. Thus the sternest of rationalist critics may not finally have attained to the consistency he so unwearyingly pursued through many thousands of pages, but I hope to have shown in the previous chapters that this does not disqualify him as a critic and man of letters worthy of attention alongside better–known figures like Leslie Stephen, George Saintsbury, and Edmund Gosse.

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[204] *What to Read*, p. 8.

[205] *Ibid.*

[206] Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library*, new ed., 4 vols (London, 1907), III, p. 143.

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO PERIODICALS: A SELECTION

It would not be exaggerated to state that Robertson wrote many hundreds, possibly thousands of articles for the periodical press, only a small percentage of which deals with literary topics. The majority of Robertson's contributions to periodicals were produced for rationalist and freethought journals with which he was particularly closely associated: Progress, Our Corner, National Reformer, Free Review, Reformer, and Literary Guide. In addition, he wrote for many other journals sympathetic to his particular ideological stance, such as the Ethical World, Humane Review, Malthusian, Progressive Review, and South Place Magazine. In scope, Robertson's contributions range from short notices and reviews to full-length scholarly articles which sometimes formed the basis for later books.

We also come across articles by Robertson on a characteristically diverse range of topics in a variety of periodicals not specifically aimed at an audience of rationalists and freethinkers, such as the Contemporary Review, Criterion, Edinburgh Review, English Review, Life and Letters, Living Age, Nation, North American Review, Sociological Review, Westminster Review, Yellow Book, and many others. A full bibliography of Robertson's contributions to the periodical press would take up many more pages than available here. What I have provided below is a selection of articles on literary topics which have not been reprinted in ETCM, NETCM, or Criticisms, arranged by journal and then chronologically. In line with the main focus of this study, the idea is to guide readers to articles by Robertson which show him in his capacity as a literary critic and which would otherwise be difficult to unearth. The articles marked with an asterisk (*) are specifically discussed or referred to in the main text.

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Samenvatting

De Schot John Mackinnon Robertson (1856-1933) was een van de meest erudiete en productieve auteurs van zijn tijd, hoewel hij nu goeddeels in de vergetelheid is geraakt. Robertson schiep een omvangrijk oeuvre van boeken en tijdschriftartikelen waarin hij zich deskundig toonde op vele uiteenlopende gebieden, van sociologie tot economie, van antropologie tot geschiedkunde, van literatuurgeschiedenis to Bijbelse kritiek, etc. In vrijwel al zijn geschriften laat Robertson zich zien als een fervent pleitbezorger van het rationalistisch gedachtengoed, en bepleit hij de noodzaak om het aan de natuurwetenschappen ontleende wetenschappelijk denken toe te passen op alle gebieden van menselijke kennis.

Hij zag religie als het voornaamste obstakel dat deze ontwikkeling in de weg stond, en zijn leven en werk stond dan ook voor een belangrijk deel in het teken van anti-godsdienstig activisme. Robertsons reputatie als gevreesd voorvechter van compromisloos atheïsme is ongetwijfeld een van de redenen waarom zijn werk op het gebied van literaire kritiek niet de aandacht heeft gekregen die het verdient. Deze studie probeert dan ook een lans te breken voor Robertson als literair criticus, met bijzondere aandacht voor het spanningsveld dat zijn achtergrond als rationalistisch denker vaak in zijn literair-kritische werk creëerde.

In Hoofdstuk 1 wordt Robertsons levensloop geschetst. De autodidact Robertson kwam al op jonge leeftijd in contact met het secularisme, een anti-religieuze volksbeweging die concrete sociale verbeteringen voorstond. De charismatische leider van de beweging, Charles Bradlaugh, maakte Robertson tot zijn rechterhand, en gedurende Robertsons hele leven zou Bradlaugh zijn grote voorbeeld blijven. Onder Bradlaughs invloed ontwikkelde Robertson zich in de jaren 1880 tot een vaardig journalist en criticus met een sterk ontwikkelde politieke belangstelling. Aan het einde van de jaren 1890 besloot hij zich definitief aan de politiek te wijden, zodat hij uiteindelijk in 1906 voor de liberalen toetrad tot het Lagerhuis. Zijn loopbaan in de politiek duurde tot 1918, waarna hij de gelegenheid kreeg zich meer toe te leggen op zijn grote liefde: het Elizabethaanse drama, en met name de heikele kwestie door wie Shakespeares stukken nu daadwerkelijk geschreven waren. Hierover publiceerde hij vele studies die niet zonder invloed bleven, en ten tijde van zijn

dood in 1933 stond hij dan ook voornamelijk bekend als een tegendraads Shakespeare criticus.

Deel 1 van Hoofdstuk 2 beschrijft in kort bestek de opkomst in het Engeland van de negentiende eeuw van het rationalistisch-wetenschappelijk denken ten koste van religie en kerk. Dit opkomend rationalisme nam vele vormen aan, van gematigd tot radicaal, waarvan de belangrijkste hier aan de orde komen. Deel 2 van dit hoofdstuk is gewijd aan Robertson als rationalistisch denker, waarbij al snel duidelijk wordt dat voor Robertson filosofie in het teken stond van anti-religieuze propaganda. Zoals veel intellectuelen in zijn tijd was Robertson van mening dat Darwins evolutietheorie de strijd tussen wetenschap en religie definitief beslecht had in het voordeel van de wetenschap. Alleen als het wetenschappelijk denken op alle gebieden van intellectuele activiteit zou worden doorgevoerd, zou menselijke vooruitgang daadwerkelijk gewaarborgd zijn.

Deze stellingname was van grote invloed op zijn positie als literair criticus. Robertson constateerde een bedroevend gebrek aan consistentie in de literair–kritische oordelen van zijn tijd, en zag ook hier een rol voor de wetenschap weggelegd. Deel 1 van Hoofdstuk 3 behandelt de ideeen van een aantal negentiende–eeuwse Britse en Franse critici (G.H. Lewes, E.S. Dallas, Hippolyte Taine, Ferdinand Brunetière, Emile Hennequin, H.M. Posnett, R.G. Moulton, J.A. Symonds) die dezelfde overtuiging waren toegedaan, terwijl Deel 2 ingaat op Robertsons reacties op deze ideeën en op zijn eigen theorieën hieromtrent. Robertson voelde zich bijzonder aangetrokken tot de ideeën van de Franse criticus Emile Hennequin, die getracht had de factoren die bij het vormen van een literair oordeel een rol spelen zo compleet mogelijk in kaart te brengen. Uiteindelijk was Robertson echter niet zozeer een voorstander van het doorvoeren van een bepaalde methode in de literaire kritiek als wel van een in het algemeen meer methodische benadering van de totstandkoming van literaire opinie.

In Hoofdstuk 4 komen Robertsons concrete literair-kritische oordelen aan bod. Deel 1 richt zich op Robertson als toneelcriticus, waarbij de nadruk ligt op zijn pogingen, vervat in talrijke boeken en artikelen, via 'wetenschappelijke' methoden de ware auteur(s) van Shakespeares stukken te achterhalen. Robertsons conclusie dat deze het resultaat zijn van een collectief auteurschap blijkt uiteindelijk voor een belangrijk deel te stoelen op Robertsons welhaast blinde geloof in Shakespeares genie.

Deel 2 van dit hoofdstuk gaat vervolgens in op Robertsons romankritiek tegen de achtergrond van het contemporaine debat over realisme in de roman. Zijn oordelen over het werk van W.D. Howells, Emile Zola, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling en Joseph Conrad maken duidelijk dat Robertson geen voorstander was van een 'fotografisch–objectieve' weergave van de

werkelijkheid in fictie, maar van een meer idealistische, moreel geladen vorm van realisme die hij bij uitstek in Conrads werk belichaamd vond.

Deel 3, tenslotte, behandelt Robertson's poëziekritiek, waarbij opvalt dat hij de esthetisch-formalistische aspecten van poëzie aanmerkelijk hoger aanslaat dan de moreel-inhoudelijke, in schijnbare tegenspraak met zijn opvattingen over de roman. Deze voorkeur blijkt nadrukkelijk uit zijn kritiek op het werk van Edmund Spenser, Wordsworth en Coleridge, Shelley, Whitman, en Tennyson, die hier afzonderlijk wordt behandeld.

Al met al laat Robertson zich kennen als een onafhankelijk criticus die krachtige oordelen niet schuwt, ook al slaagt hij er niet altijd in de hoge doelen die hij zichzelf stelt, met name als literair theoreticus, te bereiken. Bovendien stelt zijn werk ons in staat nieuw inzicht te verwerven in een groot aantal literair–kritische debatten die zich in Groot–Britannië en daarbuiten aan het einde van de negentiende en het begin van de twintigste eeuw afspeelden.

Curriculum Vitae

Odin Dekkers was born in Susteren on 14 August 1969, and was educated at the Bisschopelijk College Schöndeln, Roermond, and the University of Nijmegen, where he read English from 1988 to 1992. During the academic year 1992-1993 he was employed as a junior teacher, and from 1993 to 1997 as a junior research fellow at the English Department of the University of Nijmegen. At the moment he works as acquisitions editor for Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers in Lisse, where he is responsible for the English Studies books and journals.

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